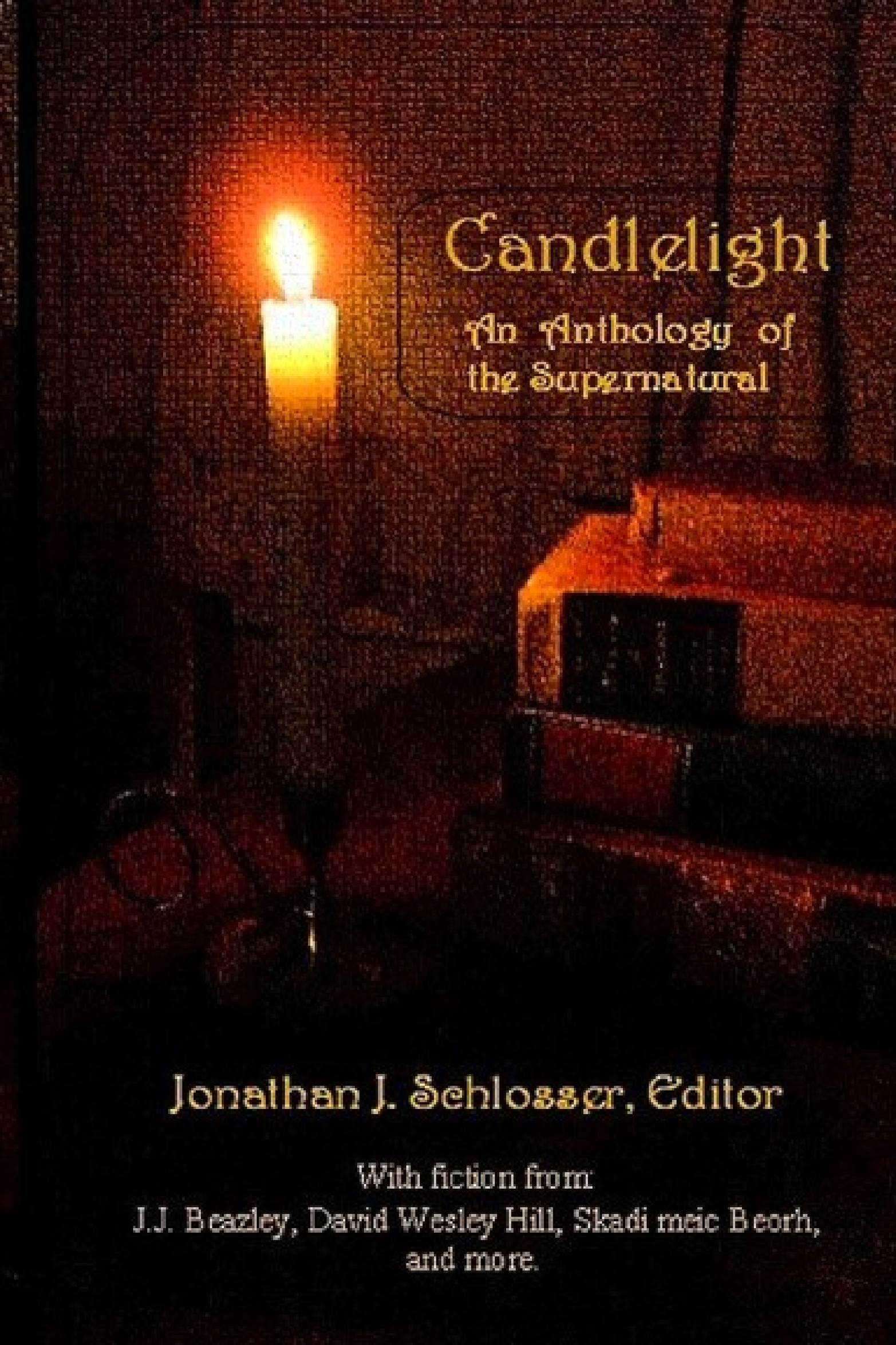
Candlelight
An Anthology of the Supernatural
Jonathan J. Schlosser, Editor
With fiction from
J.J. Beazley, David Wesley Hill, Skadi mac Beorh,
and more.

Candlelight

A Dark Anthology of the Supernatural

Volume I

Jonathan J. Schlosser, Editor

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A Word from the Editor

Candlelight became an international journal almost entirely through the intervention of fate. Or accident. Or pure luck, at least on my part. There was never a conscious effort to find work from other countries; in fact, using the websites I did to put out the submission call, I didn't even think about it. I simply knew I wanted, needed, stories. And so I put the call out, and waited. That seemed simple enough and I just hoped, back in those first days when it was more a concept than a reality, that I'd get something worth reading. That I'd find some stories that I loved, that I wanted, that I knew deserved to be read by others. It was a hope that remained a hope for a few days, until I found that first story. That first one that I really, really liked. That I knew would make it into the anthology. I remember I was eating dinner when I started reading it, Ramen noodles at work, and they were cold by the time I finished it. Because I'd forgotten about them.

That story was the first one you'll read in these pages, at least if you stick to convention and at the beginning. It's a dark little tale called "More Things in Heaven and Earth," and it's by J.J. Beazley.

Beazley, of course, is from the U.K.

And so that was the beginning of the international stories, the moment when I realized the potential that was out there. Of course I knew these stories were there, but it hadn't dawned on me yet that I would receive them. It hadn't occurred to me just how small the world has become. Some of this I think is due to the few journals out there that cater only to writers from their home countries. There is one that I wish I could be published in—I keep finding myself looking at the listing on duotrope, wondering if I should submit despite my western lineage—that is exclusive to Australian writers. It comes out on that continent and publishes people who were born there, who live there. I've lived there for a time, but five months is too short to establish myself enough to submit. And through this, I believe, my perceptions became warped.

I should have been tipped off, really. I have, myself, been published in a handful of English journals, publications which come out much closer to J.J. Beazley than to me. I've never had a problem submitting to them or being accepted there, or at least considered along with others. This should have opened my eyes, but it didn't. Not quite. What did, however, were the stories I received.

Julya Oui is from Malaysia. Glynn Barrass is from, like Beazley, the U.K. J.R. Cain is from Australia, from a little town that I've actually been to (reading the name on the top of the page brought back a bit of nostalgia; I won't lie). And, of course, I have writers from California, Kansas, New York, and elsewhere. These stories are just as good as the rest, just grown a little closer to home.

Overall, I think the difference in nationalities is excellent. I think it gives the reader a true perspective on what is out there, a true cross-section of the fiction that is being written day in and day out, all across the globe.

Further, it gives the reader a chance to experience. I have left the British spellings the way they were sent to me, the way they

were intended. This is not because M.S. Word or my red pen missed something. This is because I feel like it really preserves the feel, this way. Keeping the phrasing is important, as well—Australians and Englishmen may speak the same language I do, but we often put our words together in ways that are quite different. I wanted the reader to feel like they were hearing Beazley speak when they read his story, or hearing Cain, or Barrass, or any of the others. I wanted them to get the story the way it was formed, fully intact.

Furthermore, I would expect the anthology to make the trip across the ocean. With international authors comes international attention, and, for them, I have preserved the American feel of the American stories. And, if I am to do that, it seems only fair that I keep theirs, as well.

And so that is where we're at, sitting here with a compilation of stories from across the world. Some people have said that the small press is where we'll find the next great authors. I think that couldn't be more true. The small press is able to take chances, to find those stories that the larger companies refuse to gamble on because they won't make enough money. That restriction is gone here, and the art of story is so much more alive for it. I believe that I've found stories that are not only good, but *great*, and I hope you, the reader, will agree.

Because this is only the beginning.

Enjoy.

Oh, and make sure to turn off the electric lights first.

Jon Schlosser
Grand Rapids, MI
October 9th, 2008

Candlelight

More Things in Heaven and Earth

J.J. Beazley

I'm one of those people to whom others like to tell their stories. I suppose it helps being broadminded and having a deeply held belief that nothing, literally, is impossible. If someone tells me they've witnessed something that's "impossible" I don't write them off. I don't try to explain away their experiences with that mixture of condescension and arrogance so common among the modern, rational mass of a population focused unerringly on the heavily blinkered certainties of street level science.

So people can trust their private experiences with me. And I've heard plenty of them. This is one of the stranger ones.

I was at a party recently and the talk turned, as it often does when the drinking has reached that comfortable, intermediate stage between reticence and oblivion, to the meaning of life and the nature of reality. Never being one to hold back, I offered my liberal views and, as usual, found the reaction mixed, ranging from effusive agreement to snorting cynicism. When I drew apart from the crowd I was approached by a young man in his mid twenties whom I knew only casually and who wanted to tell me how right I was to keep an open mind. He was quietly spoken, calm, articulate—a little "downbeat." He had a troubled air about him that suggested he had a story to tell, and that he wanted to tell it to me there and then. And so he did.

It was obvious that he hadn't drunk a lot; his speech was clear and his eyes were sharp. There was no trace of that dewy-eyed look characteristic of the medium stage of inebriation that usually loosens people's tongues. The best way to pass his story on would be to repeat it more or less verbatim, with neither embellishment nor censorship. This is what he told me.

"Ten years ago," he began, "I was living with my parents in a village in a rural part of Derbyshire. It wasn't a picturesque village, pretty ordinary really, a few big houses, some smaller – nothing very old. Our house was part of a barn conversion, one of a group of eight arranged close together around a courtyard on a lane that led out of the village.

"About fifty yards down the lane the road passed over a stream and my dad said that it formed a boundary. Beyond it was an energy centre, he said. I wasn't sure what he meant by that at the time, but I understand better now. Another hundred yards further on, the village church stood on a small patch of ground to the left of the lane and Dad was fascinated by it. He read up on its history and found that the oldest part was Saxon. It had been extended by the Normans and then further added to by later generations. But the Saxon stonework was still visible in parts and Dad said that it was probably built on an ancient sacred site, as early churches usually were.

"To the right of the lane, opposite the churchyard, was a field with a raised mound that had been the site of a Norman manor house. I remember Dad going on about it, saying that he didn't think the Normans built manor houses as such, only castles to stop the Saxons and rival barons getting to them. He also said that the medieval gentry were thought to have been associated with esoteric knowledge – members of orders like the Knights Templar and the early Masons—and he suspected that the first Norman who had chosen to set up home there probably did so because he recognized it as a powerful site.

"The stream curved around the far side of the field, forming its natural boundary, and beyond that was a pool about two hundred feet long by thirty or forty feet wide. That excited Dad, too. He said that the ancient Celts had held pools in great reverence, regarding them as sacred places and gateways to other worlds. At the far end of the pool was the top corner of a wood

through which the stream ran, and which you could also get into from the lane about a hundred yards beyond the church.

"This whole area impressed Dad so much. He said that the stream, pool, wood and church formed a powerful energy centre that you could feel as you walked among it—and that you could sense the lack of when you came back out.

"Mum felt it too. She told me that on one occasion they'd gone for a walk across the field and sat on a bank overhanging the brook close to the spot where it entered the wood. She said she was startled to hear what she described as a 'snorting' sound which seemed to come from inside the wood. Dad went and looked and said that he couldn't see anything. Mum joked that it was probably some half-human creature, some genetic misfit like the ones you read about in horror stories. She said it probably lived in the old mill nearby and was let out for walks now and then.

"I used to walk the lane myself sometimes, with the dog, and even I used to feel something. I used to think that it was just a sense of – what can I call it – historical richness, I suppose; a feeling that a lot had happened there over the centuries. I used to get the same feeling when we visited old abbeys and castles on holiday.

"But the only inexplicable experience I had was one night during the school holidays. I remember it was a warm, still night at the end of July. I was up late watching some film on the television. It finished at about two thirty and, on my way to bed, I went to let the cat out. I opened the front door and followed him outside, just to enjoy the balmy atmosphere for a few minutes.

"There were no lights on anywhere. Everybody else had obviously gone to bed. It was really still and peaceful; you could almost feel the silence. The only light came from our hall and there was just the slightest hint of air movement—nothing strong enough to be called even a light breeze. In the middle of the courtyard was a big lime tree which was much taller than the houses. Suddenly it shook violently and the quiet was shattered by an almighty rustling of leaves. If there'd been a gust of wind it wouldn't have been remarkable, but it really startled me because there *was* no wind. It was as though there was something sitting among the branches, shaking it wildly for a few seconds.

"I looked at the tree and it seemed suddenly massive, powerful and intimidating. I assumed that there must have been a

gust at rooftop level maybe, something that I couldn't feel down on the ground, and forgot about it. But it was only a week later that Dad had his late night experience and that was a bit more spooky.

"He was up late one night doing some work ready for the next day, when he heard the dog whining downstairs. The previous day she'd had an upset stomach and Dad had paid the price for ignoring her pleas to be taken out; he'd got the job of cleaning up the diarrhea. So he decided he'd better not make the same mistake again and took her out.

"She was happy enough, apparently, as they walked through the courtyard and past the garages, but became reluctant to go on as they approached the entrance to the lane which ran to the church. Dad said he got a bit irritated with her as she'd obviously been asking to go out. He tried to cajole her into going further. As they reached the junction with the lane she stopped and looked even more frightened. That put the wind up Dad a bit. He believed that animals can sense things that we can't. A lot of people do, don't they? I think they're probably right.

"Anyway, he'd never been afraid of dark lanes at night and managed to get her a bit further until they were twenty or thirty yards down the lane. At that point the dog refused to move another step. She stood rigid, with a terrified look in her eyes. Suddenly – and bear in mind that this was an unlit country lane with no moon to speak of, the village behind him in darkness and no sound apart from the slightest rustling of the odd tree – he heard a low growl. It was unmistakable, he said, and came from the direction of the church.

"He had a torch with him and immediately shone it in the direction of the noise, but said that was even more disturbing because all he could see was a pool of weak light illuminating a bend in the lane a few yards further down. He had the feeling, as you would I suppose, that something was going to appear around it any second. Now *he* was frightened; he openly admitted it, and needed no further encouragement to walk quickly back to the house, turning around every few seconds and shining the light behind him.

"I was still up when he came in and he looked disturbed in a way I'd never seen before. He told me the story and said that he

kept hearing that verse from The Ancient Mariner, the one that runs:

> *Like one that on a lonesome road doth walk in fear and dread,*
> *And, having once turned round, walks on, and turns no more his head,*
> *Because he knows some frightful fiend doth close behind him tread.*

"That seemed to bring him out of his fear and he laughed the whole thing off; though it's interesting that he didn't put any of it down to imagination. I know that too many strange things had happened to him to do that. He had developed the ability to put them in a bag of experiences and not let them trouble him—that was the way he described it. He said it was the best way of dealing with them – put them away, close the lid and don't dwell on them. Otherwise you end up being too frightened to go to sleep at night!

"What did bother him, though, was that the experience put him off going down the lane after dark and he didn't like being 'imprisoned', as he put it. He tried to rationalise the experience by coming up with possible explanations for the noise. But he was adamant that it was a growl like that of a large animal. The only large animals around at the time were the cows in the field, and cows don't growl – so what does?

"The only physical explanation we could think of was the possibility that there might have been a big cat at large. Heaven knows there are enough stories about them, and they can't all be put down to imagination or mistaken identity. But surely there would have been incidents of farm animals being attacked and Dad said that, on the night in question, he'd noticed that the cows he could see at the edge of the field seemed relaxed, which they wouldn't have been if there'd been a puma or panther on the prowl.

"We never found out what it was. There were no reports of animal mutilations or sightings of any sort, and gradually the incident drifted into the background. There were no other strange incidents to speak of and the mystery faded into the background.

"But then, about three months later when we were getting deep into autumn, Dad had what he referred to as his 'rum do'. I

remember him saying on a couple of occasions that he felt the earth energies decaying, as though the vitality of summer was going to sleep along with mother nature. He also had a strong belief in the existence of beings which occupy the same space as us but in another dimension. He openly admitted a belief in fairies, although he always liked to qualify the term because he said it carried unfortunate connotations! He said that he felt they were going into hibernation as well.

"Anyway, one night – I think it was in October – he was in the kitchen making a cup of coffee when (and I have to emphasise here, all I know is what he reported and it was pretty bizarre) his eye was drawn to a movement beyond the window. It was dark outside and therefore difficult to see much, even with the streetlight a few yards down the road. The reflection of the lighted kitchen was pretty much all you could see when you looked at the window.

"As he strained his eyes to see what the movement was, he saw a white face turn towards him and stare back. He said that the face was 'human, yet not human'. He had the impression that it was the size of a human face and had all the normal features; but it was different. There was something about the shape that gave it an animal-like quality and the eyes looked harsh and fierce – 'predatory' was the word he used. And the other strange thing was that the face was low to the road, as though its body was walking on all fours. He said he'd never felt so frightened in his life.

"That face, in that position, was so bizarre and menacing. He said he couldn't tell how long he stared at it, and it stared back at him. It could have been three seconds or three minutes – he was rooted to the spot and engulfed with a sense of horror he'd never felt before. Suddenly, the thing leapt straight at the window with lightning speed and crashed against it, cracking the outside pane of the double glazing with an almighty noise.

"Dad said he felt a sense of mindless panic and the need to flee. He turned and ran out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. He had the presence of mind to run to the cupboard under the stairs where he knew he had a ball of nylon string. He intended to tie one end to the kitchen door and secure the other to something solid just in case the 'creature' smashed the window and came in. As he fumbled among the bag, trying to find the string, he became more and more panicky and uncoordinated."

I interrupted my storyteller at that point to ask where he was at the time all this was happening. Had he heard or seen anything?

"No," he said "I'm coming to that."

He continued:

"While Dad was rummaging in the hall cupboard, Mum came out of the living room to see what was going on. Dad mumbled something about 'something bloody evil trying to smash the kitchen window and get in'. Apparently, Mum looked him and the kitchen door a couple of times, and then said that she hadn't heard anything, just Dad slamming the door and rushing about like a mad thing. There couldn't be anything there, she said, because she'd just heard a couple of their neighbours walk down the lane outside the house, talking perfectly normally. Dad stopped and listened. He admitted that he couldn't hear anything now but was adamant that he had seen something fly at the kitchen window and crack it.

"Mum didn't know what to make of it but, never being one to be messed about (it's funny isn't it how, when the chips are down, women often turn out to be braver than men?), she grabbed a hammer that was lying on top of a tool bag in the cupboard and made for the kitchen door. Not surprisingly, Dad got a bit anxious; but Mum insisted on opening the door slowly and looking in. She opened it bit by bit, looking carefully at each stage with the hammer at the ready, until it was fully open. There was nothing in there and the window was unmarked. Dad sat on the floor breathing heavily, feeling embarrassed and confused but still pretty frightened.

"I was out when all this was happening, but I remember knowing that something was wrong when I came home. They were both in strangely quiet moods. I asked what was going on but they wouldn't say; just said it was nothing important and that it would blow over.

"I got to hear the whole story a couple of weeks later. During those two weeks I'd noticed that there was a strange atmosphere in the house. It didn't trouble me much as, like most fifteen-year-olds, I spent most of my time sitting in my own room with my computer and stereo and so on. But I'd also noticed that Dad had taken to closing the curtains and blinds before it went dark every evening. It was unlike him and I took him up on it once,

saying that he was shutting out the daylight. He made some remark about curtains adding to the insulation in the winter—even though it was only autumn.

"Then, late one afternoon, Dad and I came home together. We'd both been out and he'd given me a lift home. As we walked into the living room, he made for the windows to close the curtains. Mum was in there reading and he snapped at her for not closing them herself, even though it wasn't fully dark yet. He stopped suddenly and a look of fear spread over his face like I'd never seen before. (Have you ever noticed how a look of real terror in somebody's eyes is contagious? It cuts straight into you and makes you terrified as well). He was staring at the window that looked out onto the courtyard. Mum and I both looked in the same direction, and then she looked at Dad and said 'You've seen it again, haven't you?'

"Dad nodded and looked away from the window. Mum and I spoke together. 'Seen what?' I said, while Mum said 'Where?'

"Dad went and sat down. He leant forward with his arms folded across his chest in that way that people do when they're trying to explain to themselves something that defies explanation. 'In the shrubs outside the window,' and nodded his head in that direction. 'Was it the same as before?' asked Mum. 'Mm,' said Dad. 'It was dark and hazy, but it was him alright.' 'Who?' I asked, feeling a bit spooked myself.

"And then the whole story came out. I was all for Dad seeing a doctor, but I knew him well enough to take what he said seriously. He was highly intelligent and I'd always been brought up to accept his views on other dimensions and the like. His opinion was that this 'creature' was real enough, but only he could see it. He said that the episode with the kitchen window was an example of the power that some things have to put realities into a person's mind that are exclusive to them. Apparently, he'd seen this thing looking at him on several occasions, always when it was dark or nearly dark, and always through windows. On one occasion he'd seen it through the skylight over his head in the office. That must have been really scary.

"But the worst one happened about a week later. He was outside one mild, bright autumn day, cleaning the downstairs windows. He suddenly spotted the face of this thing in the glass –

in broad daylight! His first thought was that it was a reflection and turned around in horror. There was nothing there and his instinct went into self-protective mode; he told himself that this one was just imagination. Then an awful thought occurred to him. It was bright outside but the interior of the room was relatively dark. He had only seen the face. If it had been a reflection from a bright exterior he would have seen the whole body. What if it wasn't a reflection at all, and the 'thing' was *inside the house*? He had trouble putting that one into a bag of experiences and closing the lid!

"He was pretty edgy that night and we talked about the idea of getting some sort of exorcist in, but that's not as easy as it sounds; they're not listed in Yellow Pages (we looked, believe it or not). And Dad had long since moved away from the established church – he said that the teachings of mainstream Christianity were too simplistic, irrational and loaded with contradictions to be taken seriously. So where do you look for an exorcist, if you can't go to the local vicar?

"The fact that he had seen it in daylight clearly worried him, too. He felt that it might mean that the creature was getting closer and becoming bolder. Up to that point he'd felt an understandable sense of horror at seeing it. Now he was beginning to feel threatened. What if it should be working up to an attack of some sort? The nature of such an attack was impossible to predict – and certainly didn't bear thinking about. But how do you avoid thinking about it in that situation?

"He did take to reading a lot – anything he could find on the subject of parallel worlds and alternative dimensions. He found a lot of interesting stuff too. He told me one night that there was a widespread belief in ancient philosophies that matter is simply energy vibrating on a wavelength that prevents other matter, vibrating on the same or similar wavelengths, from co-existing in the same space and time. That's why things are what we call 'solid'. But matter vibrating on a widely different wavelength *could* co-exist, and this was the explanation for ghosts, fairies, demons and so on.

"Apparently this isn't just ancient philosophy, either. It seems that quantum physics is starting to come to the same conclusion. He believed that this 'creature' was some inhabitant of just such a world. But what he couldn't understand was why it was making its presence felt to him? Why him and nobody else?"

At this point my storyteller paused. He lowered his head for a few minutes, then raised it again and looked beyond me and into the distance. He looked back at me and said:

"Two weeks later, Dad disappeared."

He paused again but I was impatient.

"How do you mean, 'disappeared' – into thin air?"

"Not exactly – though it came to look that way eventually. It was a Wednesday night. I came home from a friend's house at about eleven thirty. Mum was looking anxious and I asked where Dad was.

"She told me that she'd arrived home as usual at seven o'clock and Dad's car was in the garage, but there was no sign of him in the house. She assumed that he'd gone out for a walk, but she was a bit surprised as it was late November and it was cold and dark outside. Dad didn't go for walks down the lane on cold, dark nights.

"All evening she'd been expecting him to turn up with a simple explanation, but he hadn't. His car was in the garage, his bag was in the hall, his keys were where he always left them, his coat was on the hook and his credit cards were in the pocket of his briefcase where they always were. Every bit of evidence said that he'd arrived home as usual. So where was he? She'd checked with neighbours but nobody had seen him. She'd called his mobile phone which he always kept in his trouser pocket, but had got the voice mail message straight away, suggesting that it was switched off.

"Eventually, at about midnight, she called the police thinking that he must have had a heart attack or something and be lying in the lane or the field or somewhere. They didn't take it too seriously. They said that sort of thing happened often and said they were sure Dad would turn up within twenty-four hours. Mum wasn't impressed and we decided to take a torch and search the lane and fields ourselves.

"It was a bitterly cold night. The mud at the side of the lane was frozen hard and there was a clear sky but no moon. The combination of the biting cold, the fear that was never far from us since Dad had started seeing his creature, and the worry over his whereabouts made it easily the worst night of my life.

"We spent a miserable couple of hours searching the area as best we could in the dark. We walked the length of the lane as far as the wood; we followed the brook from the road to the wood; we even stumbled through the wood itself, but eventually accepted that it was hopeless searching at night. We walked around the perimeter of the pool shining the torch on the dark water. And we jumped every time we heard a noise. We found nothing and eventually went home. Neither of us went to bed. Dad might come back, or phone. The next day we searched the wood methodically in daylight but still found nothing.

"A few days later the police took Dad's disappearance seriously and started a missing persons enquiry. They did searches and checks and even put a diver into the pool. Still nothing.

"For the next few weeks Mum was beside herself with grief, worry and speculation. She had time off work but that didn't help and she went back before the doctor's note expired.

"Eventually the frantic feelings of worry and endless imaginings gave way to helplessness and, as time went by, we just got used to the situation and life returned to a sort of routine. The mystery was never far from our minds though, and Mum was never quite the same again."

The young man went quiet for a while, as though building himself for a final chapter in his drama. I said nothing this time, but waited for him to continue.

"And then, about three years ago, I got married. My girlfriend was already pregnant and our daughter was born five months later. That seemed to help Mum a lot. It gave her something to live for again and we spent a lot of time at the old house in Derbyshire. I'd told my wife the story of Dad's disappearance but Jessica, our daughter, was still too young to understand and we'd obviously never said anything to her."

I detected a shudder ripple through the young man as he went quiet again.

"It wasn't over," I suggested, reading the obvious message from his body language.

"No. Last Sunday we went to see Mum—we always go over one day at the weekend. Mum and I were in the kitchen and my wife had gone to the loo. Jessica was in the living room. Suddenly there was a shriek and she came rushing into the hall, clearly

distressed. She kept saying 'seen a goblin, seen a goblin'. My blood turned to ice. All the old stuff with Dad came back. 'Where?' I asked her. 'In the trees,' she said, pointing in the direction of the living room windows. She obviously meant the shrubs outside. This was too much, but I had to go and look, didn't I?"

He paused again, breathing slightly more heavily.

"I saw it for a brief second or so. The face 'human, but not human', the figure crouched on all fours, the look of something in its eyes that could have been malice, and yet somehow looked pitiful. Then it disappeared."

I felt genuinely fearful for the young man. It seemed that he was going to have to suffer the same ordeal as his father. My first reaction was merely to state the obvious:

"I suppose it was the same thing your Dad saw?"

"No," said the young man, shaking his head, "it couldn't have been."

"Why not?" I asked.

He looked directly at me and smiled a strange, empty smile. And now his eyes *were* damp, but it had nothing to do with drink.

"Because it *was* my Dad."

JJ Beazley
October 9th, 2008

About the Author

Having spent several decades trying unsuccessfully to write fiction, JJ Beazley was pleasantly surprised to be suddenly handed the gift in the summer of 2002. He still doesn't know where it came from, but he does know what precipitated it. It was seeing a tree shake violently and unaccountably one windless night in July, and it was hearing a low, menacing growl in a quiet country lane a few nights later. He wrote both incidents down and extended them into a short story called More Things in Heaven and Earth. The first draft was rough, but it was recognisably fiction in form and mode of expression. Needless to say, it has been polished considerably since then. Thirty-nine more short stories and a novella followed, and fifteen of them have now been published with a couple more waiting in the wings.

He knows his fiction will never make him rich or famous, and neither would he want them to. He wrote the stories that wanted to be written. Whether they have any value to a reader was never really the issue; and whether any more will ever be written remains to be seen.

He lives the life of an English peasant in a small house in the depths of rural Derbyshire. He lives alone and is presently unemployed, which means he is probably slightly worse off financially than the average English peasant. He takes comfort from the fact that poverty is a great teacher.

The Shoe Shiner's Bargain

John E. Rogers, Jr.

Morton had run the shoe shine chair, the Chair, next to the antique shop on the corner of Main and King for twenty-six years. He had manned it during the bleak years after St. Johns Cathedral, constructed entirely of granite from the northern quarries, had burned down, never to be rebuilt, its congregation disappearing overnight to who knew where. He had dutifully buffed wingtips all through the time when the Sickness came, taking so many of the town's children, reducing so many of his patrons to tears. He had even kept it open through the winter no one spoke of anymore, the winter when the sun didn't rise for over month.

The Chair, a standard wooden high back with wide, sandpaper steps, a palette of pitch through dun polish cups and an upright shining post, dated back to the eighteen sixties. Morton's great grandfather, also called Morton by the townsfolk of New Bedlam, had ordered it from Cincinnati after he had come back from the War between the States. The chair faced across King toward the dark-windowed bookstore. Morton's old family sweater, a grey cardigan as old as the hills and looking every bit its age, hung from a mushroom peg on the King side of the Chair.

Twilight had descended rather abruptly. The barest of winds, much colder than the season dictated, snaked its way along the curbs.

Morton was a slight man, sallow of complexion, stooped, graying at the temples. He had an easy, gentle, faintly sad smile. A smile his wife adored, even now—after forty years of marriage—though the melancholy behind it didn't escape her. It was a smile his son now was beginning to wear.

It was Morton's birthday. His seventieth.

The fact that seventy had been the age his great grandfather, and his grandfather, and his father had all died, each successively passing down the mantel of the Chair, didn't bother him. Morton was by nature a fatalist, especially when it came to life in New Bedlam. As he liked to say, there were no coincidences in New Bedlam. Chance did not, so far as he could tell, exist within its municipal limits. Cause and effect, action and reaction, all failed once you stepped across its town line.

He himself sat in the Chair now, relaxing, waiting.

At six o'clock, the traditional closing time for the Chair since—well—time out of mind, the streets had cleared as if by magic. Traffic, usually a steady trickle until nine or ten, fell off to nothing. The stop lights at the two signal-worthy intersections had frozen, and were now frozen, at red.

Morton hadn't even tried to walk home.

What was the point?

A figure appeared, walking, midway across Main. Cadaverous. Pallid. Wearing liturgical robes.

Bishop Maloney. Morton recognized him instantly. He had shined and soled the clergyman's black lace-ups for over a decade—right up until he had died in the great church fire.

"Evening to you, father," Morton said. He was not, he realized to his relief, particularly frightened. Again, what was the good of it? He hated the idea that he would collapse, weeping, unable to face whatever the town had to offer.

Surely his father hadn't. Nor his before him.

"Morton," the Bishop replied. The man's voice—Morton caught himself—the creature's voice, was reedy, as if the throat it came up through were rent with holes, or badly torn. "How about a shine?"

"For old time's sake?"

The Bishop smiled, his jet-black eyes directly on Morton. They had no irises. Morton felt his resolve, his poise, falter. The smile

was a ghastly thing to behold. The teeth were stained red from—Morton fervently hoped—consecration wine. But behind the teeth was—nothing. Darkness. Deep and beckoning, like a winter sky without stars.

"Yes," the Bishop said, "for old time's sake."

Morton forced his hands to stop trembling, broke out his rags and brushes from the bottom drawer, and set about his task. The job was calming. Clean, wipe, knead in the polish. Touch up the heels. Pick dirt and debris from the soles and the arch. Remove the gross polish. Buff. The stuff of his life. Day in. Day out.

"You've served New Bedlam well, Morton, these many years, haven't you?"

Morton's stropping twitched. He clutched the leather belt tightly.

"I've tried, sir."

The Bishop laughed. Like the smile, the laugh seemed to embody everything lifeless, dull, cold and forlorn in the universe, in time and space. Morton bit his lip. He did not, could not, look up.

"I suppose you know why I'm here."

Morton's voice shook, slightly. "I have some idea."

"Nothing lasts forever, Morton," the Bishop remarked, sounding almost blithe. "Nothing last forever, that is, without a price paid."

Morton stopped. "A price, sir?"

The wind picked up, tussling Morton's thin hair, making his eyes tear. He wiped at his cheeks.

"There are two New Bedlams, Morton. Did you know that?"

Morton shook his head, unable to reply. He could feel the Bishop's—the thing's—gaze on the top of his head as he shined.

"There's the one you've been living in for seventy years, and the one we're in right now. My New Bedlam."

"Yours, sir?" Morton managed to croak.

"Well, let's just say the one I live in. The one where those who elect to pay the price reside. There are quite a few of us. Take a look."

Morton steeled himself, folded the strop and buttoned it to the mid-step, and lifted his eyes.

The streets were full. Full of silent, slack-faced people. Some he recognized. Jim Wethersby, the old postmaster. He'd gone down in

the same church fire as the Bishop. Several others. Children, too. None spoke. None moved.

"New Bedlam has a mind of its own. But I'm sure you already know that, Morton. You've sensed it, felt it, known it inside your heart. It is an entity unto itself, making its own rules, its own bargains. And every seventy years, it makes a bargain to the shoe shine man."

"Bargain?"

The Bishop chuckled, and stamped his feet to see if any dust remained. "Good work, excellent even. Fitting." Then: "Yes, an offer. You either live with us in the other New Bedlam—shining our shoes, becoming one of us—or you die. If you choose to be with us you live, you exist, forever—in this twilight. Undying, unchanging. If you choose death, you take your chances, you find out what lies on the other side."

Something in the Bishop's tone made Morton catch himself.

For a split second, a moment, he had heard the actual Bishop—not the beast which spoke for him. There had been humanity in that voice. Longing.

The Bishop had been unwilling to take that chance.

And it agonized him.

"Is there no other way for you?" Morton asked, compassion edging his voice. "Is there no going back?"

But the Bishop was gone, swallowed, pulled back under the surface.

"This is your time, Morton, no one else's. I am here to make you that offer. Think on it well. And think fast. My master, this town, demands an answer."

The street had turned cold. Morton shivered. Blackness, like a veil or a curtain, now shrouded the rest of the buildings—the post office, the hardware store, the factories at the far east end of Main.

Morton's knees quaked, and in his mind, in his soul—or whatever tiny little bit of pebble or rock that was his essence—he quailed.

He was a fatalist, yes. But....

Then a thought occurred to him.

"Bishop, sir."

"Yes?"

"My great grandfather, my grandpa, and my dad—are they out there—in that crowd?"

The Bishop didn't answer.

Morton pulled his sweater off its peg. It was cold, yes, But he had that sweater, had always had it. Its old wool scratched at his neck and wrists. The tattered, elbow-scuffed cardigan had belonged to his family for as long as he could remember. It was the uniform of the Chair. The cold fell back. Morton felt warmth in his guts. He stepped away from the Chair, down—off the curb—onto Main. The silent crowd retreated—but without moving.

"Is my father among you? Dad?"

Nothing.

The Bishop was suddenly next to him. "What does that matter? This is your bargain. Your future."

Morton smiled. The Bishop shuddered, and—for an instant—his, its, eyes brightened.

"I trusted in, I trust in my father. He taught me the Chair. He raised me with love." Morton paused. Then: "As I have done with my son." He almost whispered that last part, and his eyes grew distant, as if focusing on something a good ways off.

"Enough!" the Bishop bellowed. "Your answer."

Morton cocked his head, his wizened, lined face beaming, strong. "You know the answer. Death was good enough for my fathers, all of them. It is good enough for me."

He faced the Bishop fully. Unafraid.

The Bishop shook himself mightily. For a heartbeat, his eyes and his voice turned human, "Go with God," he said. And was gone.

Then the thing that pretended to be the Bishop twisted into what look like an ancient ash tree. One of its branches slashed angrily down, striking Morton a heavy blow.

Morton never flinched.

♠

Morton was the one who found his father dead, slumped over in the Chair, wearing the family sweater—a sweater Morton himself was starting to favor. It was just after six. Morton had come to bring his dad back to a small party at the house, a birthday

gathering. The streets were actually bustling. The pedestrians, many carrying shopping bags from the brightly-lit bookstore on the other side of King—open until nine everyday—had assumed the old man was sleeping, it being so unseasonably warm. Morton had wondered about the sweater. Why had his dad put it on given the heat of the night? Well, he had been old—seventy. Maybe he'd had the chills. Who could say?

Morton cried. He sat on the middle step, and wept. But through his tears he couldn't help but notice that the button strop was still damp from a buffing. Apparently his dad had had a last minute customer. Curious. Unusual. Typically from five on the Chair was dead.

An ambulance arrived. Morton's father was taken to the coroner's office at the hospital on Johns. The paramedic had removed his father's sweater, and handed it to Morton. He wouldn't be needing it anymore, after all.

Morton closed up the Chair quickly. He had to get home as soon as possible to see to his distraught mother. The guests were with her, to be sure, comforting her. But they couldn't stay the night.

Fortunately, young Morton was well versed in the breakdown, having been taught the trade early by his dad. He made short work of it. When done, he shut the locking panels and chained the box to a parking meter as was the family's custom.

On the walk home, he considered the matter of age and death. His father had been seventy. If memory served, so had his grandpop, and maybe even his great grandpa. He'd have to check on that. Strange, that bit. Hell of a coincidence. He halted in his tracks. What had his dad always said? "There were no coincidences in this damn town."

The oddness of that statement cut into him.

Despite the almost sultry evening breeze, he felt a sudden draft—coming from nowhere. Since he had the sweater with him, he donned it.

And immediately felt better.

John E. Rogers, Jr
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

John E. Rogers, Jr. is a practicing attorney in Los Angeles, California. For the ten years prior to becoming a lawyer, Mr. Rogers was a columnist for the *Los Angeles Daily Journal* newspaper. He has had science fiction stories published in *Orion's Child* (original incarnation), *Tomorrow SF*, *Jupiter* (London), Fall and Rise (book anthology), *Jackhammer* magazine, and *AlienSkin* magazine. Stories by him will appear later this year in *Continuum* magazine (San Diego) and in *Revolution SF* (Austin, Texas). His Helixport Tales, stories set in a vast alien megalapolis, are serialized in *Worlds of Wonder* ezine. The idea of **The Shoe Shiner's Bargain** came to him in a flash, late one evening, after a glass of spiced red wine, while putting his black wingtips away for the night. Mr. Rogers is married, and has two sons, one 21, and another 15.

The Messiah of Yreg-ngad

Allen Wise

Beware, New York. Beware, world. Your end draws nigh. I know. It brings me no pleasure to say that I am it.

I was not always so.

Only a month ago I lived alone in a condo in Manhattan and there pursued my literary ambitions, though around that time I was realizing they would never amount to much. I received word of the death of my last living relative, my great uncle, Herman Isaac Martine IV. I was to inherit his fortune, somewhat decayed, as well as his estate. To claim them I must travel to his hometown, one Hollum, in southern Tennessee. Having regrettably little to occupy me in Manhattan, I set forth with all due haste.

Hollum sits in the southernmost Smoky Mountains, in a remote area scorned by its neighbors. Even in that decadent and incest-prone region, Hollum had earned ill favor—in part, I learned, due to the many kidnappings and disappearances attributed to the town over the years. Thus it was with a certain amount of dread that I wound about the mountains, passing through ever more sinister and forbidding crags, which loomed above me, blocking out the starlight, and massive, grotesque trees whose tentacle-like limbs seemed to grope toward me.

As I entered the town of Hollum itself, I was little reassured, for it was decayed and decrepit, the buildings leaning,

some against each other, sometimes against the stone face of the mountain itself, as if they might otherwise collapse. Indeed, a great many sat flush against the mountainside, so many that it aroused my interest. One such structure had collapsed, and I saw vaguely through its shifting debris a darkness, gaping, as of a cavern leading into the mountain . . .

Other openings honeycombed the face of the rock, and I was reminded that this once had been a mining town. Though it had experienced quite a boom in its day, that day was long past. Now it sat ghostly and quiet.

Gray-faced, sullen townsfolk slouched through the streets, and they glowered at me as I drove past.

The town attorney was serving as executor for my great-uncle's will, and so I quickly located his office, which was, to my relief, free-standing, rather than sitting pressed against the mountain face, where one of those openings might be found.

I quickly discovered that the executor was a comparatively lively, portly man by the name of Samuel D. Flaunders. I was reassured by his jovial manner and his pink cheeks, which seemed to be the first points of color and cheer I had seen in this gray, dismal place. He led me from his squat office to the towering mansion I had inherited. It rose tall and dark on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the narrow, mist-filled valley that bordered that side of Hollum. It was a grand, Victorian-style building, and I smiled despite myself as I gazed up at its turrets and gables, as I ran my gaze over its elaborate trim and lattice-work.

"It is a fine building, is it not?" my amiable guide asked.

"It is indeed. In need of some care, but . . . yes. It is fine."

At this point he turned his eyes to me, having to look up, for I am tall, if thin, and said with some gravity, even trepidation, "Do you mean to take up residence in Hollum?"

Sobered by his new demeanor, I pondered the question, then said, "It is tempting, and a beautiful house, but this town, well . . . "

I couldn't bring myself to finish for fear of wounding him, but he understood. "It is just as well," he said. "People hereabouts don't like outsiders." His expression darkened, and he looked away, out over the misty valley. The mist moved sluggishly, and it seemed thicker than it should. "The people here are not like other people,

boy. Not all of them, perhaps. They haven't got us all yet. But they're trying. Yes, my boy, they're trying. There aren't many of us true-men left."

He departed shortly thereafter, leaving me to wonder at his strange words. In exploring the deserted manse, I found something to occupy my mind, and shortly I was able to shove aside my fears, my doubts. I found old family photo albums, journals, my great-uncle's library. I spent the rest of the day absorbed in the study of the life of a dead man. It may seem morbid, but it was the closest I had ever felt to him, and perhaps to any family member. The pictures helped connect me to him, for I had not seen him since I was a small child, and my impressions were vague and dim.

That night I dined on various canned goods I found in the storm cellar, then retired to the master suite on the second story. As I lay tossing and turning on the unfamiliar bed, I suddenly heard strange noises, coming from below.

I sat bolt upright in bed. The sounds were muted, but they were growing louder—scratching, grinding noises, as of something ripping through the earth beneath the house.

Slowly I mastered the sudden upswell of fear that gripped me. I found a torch, and, gathering my courage, crept downstairs. Holding the flashlight like a club, I stalked through the halls and rooms, looking for the culprit. Nothing. And yet the sounds continued.

With fearful fascination, I stared at the door leading down to the storm cellar, from whence the sounds must issue. For a long time, I debated whether or not to open it.

In the end, I like to think that prudence won out. I refrained from opening the door, and at last the noises ceased. I won no more sleep that night, but sat in a chair facing the cellar door, watching it grimly, half expecting it to burst open and for some nightmare to spring forth.. In the morning, with dawn light streaming in through the east-facing windows, I opened the door at last and descended into the darkness. The bald overhead bulb, combined with my flashlight, illuminated the shelf-lined walls and the stone floor. The floor was undisturbed. There was nothing more to be seen.

Later that morning I placed the property up for sale with the sole real estate agent in town. He was one of the gray people, as

I had taken to calling them—one of the ashen, cold folk that seemed to comprise the bulk of the citizenry, as opposed to the pink and comparatively healthy folk like Flaunders. When the agent asked for a copy of the key, to facilitate his showing of the property, I balked and told him I would show it by appointment only. He merely smiled, a cold, mysterious smile, and said, "Very well."

Until the property sold, I had little choice but to stay in Hollum to be on hand to sign the papers and review terms. Of course, I had nowhere else to go, really, and part of me longed to explore my ancestral seat. Thinking to ingratiate myself to the townspeople, I inquired about Sunday services at the church only to find that the church had collapsed into a sinkhole some years ago and had never been reopened.

Each night I spent in that house, I heard those same noises from below. After that first night, I did not descend to investigate but instead remained in the master bedroom, as far from the cellar as I could reasonably go, and with the added precaution of shoving my dresser before the door.

There were other sounds than the ones below, however. Occasionally I would hear a rustle or thump on the second level, as well. Too, I noticed that the number of canned goods in the cellar (which I was forced to visit during the day) was diminishing at a rate impossible to comprehend were I the cellar's only raider.

After this discovery, I spent much time combing the house, exploring it and, more importantly, measuring it. At last I discerned that one of the guest rooms' walls did not correspond with the wall in the adjoining room. After much poking and prodding and bumping, and ultimately with some rough handling, I located the suspected seam, dug my fingers underneath, and wrenched the panel open. Within I beheld darkness lit only by a single, pitifully small candle. Perched above it was a gaunt, tense face wreathed in whiskers, with wide, fearful eyes. Blinking my eyes in the gloom, it was a moment before I discerned the shotgun pointed at my breast.

My instinct was to recoil. However, I sensed that this might incite the wielder of the firearm to pull the trigger. Thus I stayed steady, took a deep breath, and said, "Uncle."

For a long moment he stared at me, and to my surprise I saw tears gather in his eyes and roll down his wizened cheeks. Almost instantly, he set the shotgun aside and pulled his creaking

self upright. We stepped forward and embraced. He smelled somewhat ripe, as though he had not bathed in some time.

"Harold," he said, and his voice was ragged as if from scant use. We drew back. My face must have betrayed my bewilderment, for he said, "I know this must seem awfully odd to you, my dear nephew, but it was the only way I could think of."

I swallowed, trying to recover my calm. "There is some wine in the kitchen," I said. "Why don't you explain over a glass?"

And so it was. As night thickened outside, and wind shrieked up from the misty valley and tore around the turrets of the manse, Great-Uncle Herman and I sat on the veranda overlooking the dark valley and helped ourselves to his wine.

"I had that room built by out-of-town contractors some years ago," he said, sipping his glass, his fearful gaze on the great void before us. "Back then I sensed the unease and foulness consuming Hollum. I wanted to be prepared. And am I ever glad I did! That room saved my life, and perhaps . . . yes, perhaps even more than that."

"But I do not understand . . . . What foulness?"

He grimaced. "I . . . I do not know, not exactly. Its influence has long been here, ever since the mine shut down sixty years ago, and perhaps before. But in the last few years it has spread unchecked. Oh, the church was a safeguard against it, but in the end . . . in the end It was stronger."

"But *what?*" I said, somewhat desperately. "What was stronger?"

He drained his glass and poured another. "That I don't know, my boy. But I ask you this: *how can there be a sinkhole in solid rock?"*

We stared at each other for a few moments, and then I dropped my gaze. Partly to change the topic, I said, "How did you do it, then? How did you fake your death?"

He shrugged his brittle shoulders. "It was not difficult, not really. I merely dug up a body from the grave, stuffed it in my car, doused the whole thing with gasoline, lit it, and ran it into a gulley. It was good enough for them to think it was me. But even that wasn't really enough, I knew. They've been watching the passes, my boy. Watching 'em good. They've been on the lookout for me, and those like me, the few true-men left, looking to escape."

With shaky fingers, I drained my glass and poured another. The wind was cold, and my bones ached with fatigue and stress. "What," I asked, "is a true-man?"

"Just like it sounds." He didn't elaborate.

Just then, there came that ominous thumping, grinding noise from beneath the storm cellar. Uncle and I exchanged grim looks. "And what," I said, "is that?"

"I dunno," he muttered, "but it's why I done what I done. I thought it would leave me alone if'n I were dead, but . . . now that you're here . . . " He sighed. "There's nothing to be done, though. Nothin', no way to beat 'em . . ."

He was sounding more and more inebriated, and I felt none too steady myself, what with the wine, the wind, and the grinding noises from below. "Why don't we retire upstairs for the night?" I said, to which he agreed. It was further agreed that he would occupy his old room, while I would take a guest bedroom. He was singing some song to himself as he tottered up the stairs. I stayed behind to cork the wine.

Just as I had done this and turned to follow Uncle, the grinding and tearing noises below reached a crescendo. I stood stock-still, feeling the vibrations beneath my feet. And then there was an explosive noise, and I started, gasped.

Had I been a more courageous man, I might have stood to confront it, whatever it was, or perhaps gone for the shotgun. Instead I bolted for the front door and tore it open, meaning to dash outside to safety.

I stopped at the threshold, my breath catching in my throat.

The townspeople were here, the gray-faced ones. They had gathered in a half ring about my house. The foremost ones were larger than the others, and more bent, twisted, some with hunched backs, and strange, fungus-like growths on their faces.

The central one, the leader, was reading from a book: "And those who stand in the path of Great Yreg-ngad will be taken and . . ."

I slammed the door, spun about, and listened to the mad crashing of my heart. Cold sweat trickled down my face, soaked my hair. What was I to do? The townspeople had blocked me off on one side, a sheer cliff dropped away on the other, and above was an old man with a gun . . .

For a moment I almost dashed upstairs, almost sought protection with Uncle. In the end, though, I shook the cowardly thought away. Whatever It was, It was coming for me, and me alone. It thought Uncle dead and gone. To go to him would be to doom him, too.

I did not have to wait for It for long.

Presently a slithering, thumping sound came from the cellar stairs, and then the door to the cellar burst open with a great crashing of splintered wood, just as I had imagined. Instantly the halls of the house filled with a terrible, fungus-like odor that nearly made me retch. A great feeling of horror and dread overcame me, and darkness swirled in my vision. I very nearly passed out, and I wish that I had. It would have spared me the sight of what came for me, half slithering, half groping its way down the hall toward the foyer where I stood. The darkness of the night cloaked it, but still I beheld a misshapen, gray-fleshed column so large that it filled the hall. Lumpy and twisted and alien, grasping tendrils and limbs extended from it, dragging it forward. Even more terrible were the human forms, or semi-human forms, that seemed to be embedded in it. They were wasted and corpse-like, but their eyes still rolled, their mouths still gnashed, and their skeletal arms still had the capability to reach for me—which they did, and gruesomely.

For a moment I stood transfixed by horror, unable to move. Then I turned, wrenched the door open, and would have tried my luck with the townspeople. But the Thing was fast. Gnarled hands and tentacles grasped me, and the awful, fungus-like odor nauseated me. I swiveled to see a great vertical slit open in the Thing, a cavernous maw, or womb, perhaps. I struggled, but in vain. The limbs shoved me inside, and its thick, rubbery, fungus-like flesh rang to the sound of my screaming. The opening closed up behind me, plunging me into blackness.

Instantly limbs seized me and forced me along the tunnel, sometimes aided by contractions of what I must call muscle, or something very like muscle. For an eternity I was sped along that ghastly cavern of fungus-like flesh, trembling and screaming and sobbing, and at last I realized I must be traveling beneath the ground, being propelled along toward the mountain wall itself, and then even within the very mountain.

Finally a new maw opened up and I was spat out in a great, high cavern. The stench of fungus was so overpowering here I retched, then shrieked mad things into the darkness. By the sound of the echoes I could tell this place was very large. I must be deep in the heart of the mountain itself. The chamber seemed too large to be part of the old, abandoned mines. Nevertheless I realized it must have been the miners who had found this place.

The only lights belonged to three blazing braziers that flamed some distance ahead of me, illuminating the grand pillars of some open cathedral. It had no walls, only the pillar-supported roof, palatial and intricately carved in some hideous, alien style. It must have existed before the miners had found it. I tried not to imagine what beings had created it.

Misshapen things lurched toward me and seized me roughly. They dragged me into the temple, and I realized the structure overhung a great abyss. Furthermore, and most horribly, *the abyss was occupied.*

The word "massive" does not do justice to the Thing that loomed above us, above the temple, that might easily have risen up the empty interior of the mountain (for I realized that the mountain was just a shell) from the very bowels of the earth itself. It was this *thing* that reeked so strongly of fungus, and whose offshoot had seized me. It was a mountainous fungoid abomination, with towers of stalks rising from great, lumpy bulwarks and peaks, and whose roots might extend beneath the very crust of the earth itself; it was likely larger than the mountain it had grown inside of, and taken over. And embedded in its hide writhed the still-animated bodies of countless humans, perhaps thousands. Their mouths opened and closed, and I perceived a horrid noise emanating from them. Was it chanting or singing or something altogether different? I will never know. One thing I do know is that their mouths opened and closed in unison, and that no will of their own so operated them. They were woven into the fabric of the Thing, and it communicated through them.

"Yes," said one of the horrors that had seized me, apparently noting the direction of my gaze. "That is why we give the Great One men, why we lay them upon the altar yonder— " He indicated the black slab that sat at the brink of the temple overhanging the abyss. "The mighty Yreg-ngad possesses few

human faculties, but He is a god, a great god from the stars, found and fed by the last men to operate this mine. Giving It men means It actually is made in part of Man, and so It can communicate to us through the ones It consumes—until they decay and are absorbed, of course, and then we must find new flesh."

Trembling, I stared at the hunched, nightmarish creature that spoke to me, and I saw it possessed little humanity itself. I imagined that not all the people placed on that slab were *devoured* by the Thing. Some doubtless had been—I drove the thought away.

"Is that what you mean to do with me?" I asked, my voice quavering.

He straightened haughtily, and for the first time I perceived his pride. He was some sort of priest to the god-thing Yreg-ngad, perhaps even its spawn, and he was arrogant of it.

"We would not waste you so," he told me. "Long have we desired one from a great city to come among us and accept the blessing of the One. Come," he said to the others, "let us show him."

As one, they dragged me toward the altar. I twisted and turned, but to no avail. They did not lay me on the slab, however, but merely stood me at the lip of the overhang. The mountainous god-thing towered over us, and it seemed to respond to our presence. A sort of stalk unfolded from it and unraveled in our direction. And, at the very tip of it, right before my eyes, opened a fleshy, flower-like thing, and within it, black and slimy and small, nestled what could only be described as a spore.

Smiling enigmatically, the priest-thing said, "Isn't it beautiful? Great Yreg-ngad has spent ages developing it. Until now we have not had one well-versed in large cities. Great Yreg-ngad will need that knowledge, and, as It takes over your brain, It will have it. For, you see, now at last our prayers have been answered. You will swallow the spore. You will return to New York, and there you will give birth to the new incarnation of the Great One, and It will have an entire city to feed from, an entire city to transform. *You will be the Messiah of Yreg-ngad!"*

♠

And so it is.

Already I can feel the ghastly spore growing inside me, overcoming me, and even as I write this journal they are driving me toward New York. Just minutes ago I looked out the window and beheld its glittering spires drawing closer.

I know they will not stand for long.

My only solace is Uncle Herman. I managed to leave him a note before I left. I can only hope that he has tracked us, and that he has brought his shotgun with him. He will not have to aim well with that gun, and I will try to stand steady—*if the Thing will let me!*

Allen Wise
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

Allen Wise has written horror, fantasy and science-fiction since he was eleven years old. He loves the old pulps, especially Lovecraft and Howard. Currently he's represented by JABberwocky Literary Agency, who is hard at work trying to sell one of his novels. You can visit, praise or curse Allen at his myspace page: myspace.com/elborak .

Doctor Afzal

Glynn Owen Barrass

During the time that I knew him, I often had the opportunity to examine Doctor Afzal's odd and sometimes crazy inventions. But never, ever, did I expect him to come up with something that actually *worked*. This is not to say that Afzal wasn't a good inventor, and the devices he put together did function, in a way. What I actually mean to say is that this was the first time he'd made something that seemed to have any kind of practical use.

Of the inventions I can recall, there was the cat detector, and the bone disrupter, amongst others, both nice ideas that I never saw put into practice. Really, I'm quite thankful for that on both counts, for the cat detector looked like a rocket launcher, and the bone disrupter, well… But, that day, when he phoned me at 11:30 in the morning, sounding so excited that his English started to fail him, I just had to climb out of bed and go and investigate. Usually I would wait until the afternoon to rise, but, because of his frantic admonishments to get my arse in gear and visit his laboratory, I showered and dressed in record time before jumping into my car and driving the few miles to his home.

As was usually the case, his front door was unlocked, so I just walked into his two-storied, semi-detached house without ringing the bell. Closing the door and retrieving the mail strewn across his doormat, I walked through the house towards the

basement, expecting to find that he had created something daft but quite interesting.

Waiting at the foot of the stairs stood Doctor Johinder Afzal, or Afzal, as he liked to be called, a short, bald, Indian man dressed in a brown tweed suit and as always, wearing a huge smile on his face. Like an airborne disease, his smile was contagious. Taking his post in one hand and mine in the other, he shook it eagerly before leading me into his laboratory, a large room filled to the brim with scientific equipment and consoles. The ceiling, floor and walls were painted green, the cabinets lining them, built by Afzal and myself, white as per Wal-Mart, flat-pack specifications. The majority of the floor space had been cleared of the usual experiments in progress and pushed back against the wall cabinets. Replacing their former space stood a bulky object covered in a large white dustsheet; a few metres before this, a table lined with computers and fronted by a monitor and a keyboard. He'd used these before, I knew, as diagnostic tools for his other inventions, and a small wire led from the table and across the floor into whatever lay beneath the sheet.

Pushing his mail into his pocket unopened, Afzal stepped towards the mysterious bulk, saying, "Well, it took a while, and a great deal of cost, but I do believe that I've discovered something wonderful."

He then pulled the sheet away with a magician's flourish, revealing a large, square box surmounted by something that looked like a bicycle wheel covered in wires and lights.

I was not impressed.

Afzal was though, flinging the sheet away before dragging me towards the device's rear and revealing a ponytail of thick tubes leading down into the floor. Feigning interest while he went through the ins and outs of stealing power from the network grid, I listened as he finally told me what his new invention was for. I had no idea you see; as far as I was concerned it was just a recycled safe with a load of miscellaneous crap attached to it. Afzal was soon to correct me.

"Did you know that science has proven the existence of other dimensions?" He grinned gleefully as he said this. "Parallel and alternative universes existing all around us?"

I'd heard the theory somewhere, possibly whilst watching a documentary or possibly whilst watching Star Trek; I nodded assent as he left the machine, heading toward the bank of computers that faced it. I followed.

"Well," he continued, tapping the keyboard and grinning from ear to ear. "The device behind us has been designed to investigate these alternate dimensions, a device that I have named 'The Uniternative."

Not surprisingly, I was quite speechless at his claim, even more so when he turned and grabbed my shoulders saying, "I'd like you to be my first voyager into the unknown, Glynn. *How about that?"*

The prospect of climbing into Doctor Afzal's homemade tomb to either suffocate or get blown up did not appeal to me, but I was quite intrigued by the concept that his invention might actually be on the level.

Still on a roll, Afzal turned from me to dash towards the other side of the room, kneeling before one of the cupboard units and removing from it a small, cardboard box. When he saw that I'd followed him he nodded eagerly before placing the box on the worktop. After quickly opening the lid, he continued.

"I have sent things through the device before of course, and just see the results!" From the box, the little doctor withdrew three quite singular objects, one of which made me flinch in disgust.

The first item he showed me was innocent enough: a teacup with a picture of a black cat across its side. Afzal said, "When I first put this cup in the machine, it had a picture of a dog on it."

"Oh right," I replied, humoring him. I was starting to believe that poor Afzal had completely lost his marbles.

The second object was a jar full of marbles.

"Now these, when I put them into the device," he waved towards the machine, "were eyeballs."

Whether or not they'd been human eyeballs, I didn't ask. The final object, and the one that caused me so much disgust, was a small, humanoid creature dressed like the Statue of Liberty, its skull and right arm mutated into the form of the original's copper crown and torch. Its throat was cut and the stone tablet was missing. He told me that this object had been replaced for potted plant.

I said, "You know Afzal, your showing me these does not make me eager to take part in your experiment."

Shaking his head, he left the objects to stride back to the machine. I stayed where I was.

"But don't you see?" he said from across the room. "The fact that the objects within the device changed means that there is an alternate Doctor Afzal out there with his own dimension traveling Uniternative machine!"

He paused for effect.

"So, you want me to go inside that thing so I can be swapped for a jar of marbles… or that?" I pointed at the thing on the tabletop.

"No, no, you mistake my meaning," Afzal said, waving me forward. I stepped towards him tentatively, thinking that if the scene were one in a horror movie, his next act would be to subdue me before stuffing me into his weird contraption.

He did open the door, but he then gave me his explanation as to why it was a good idea that I enter it.

"If I send a person to one of the other dimensions, he could take a camera with him, communicate with my alter ego, and then be back here safe and sound in time for tea."

It sounded reasonable enough, and I'd be lying if I said that my sense of adventure had not been piqued by the prospect of traveling to an alternate reality. So I headed towards him asking, "Alright then, what next?"

Grinning, and rubbing his hands together, he said, "It's really quite simple. You just climb in and I activate the device by remote." He tapped with his foot the wire leading to the computer. "But… I don't have a camera yet." His smiling face looked disappointed, but I saved the day by retrieving my cell-phone from my back pocket.

"No problem, this has a 5.0 mega pixel camera built in."

His face lit up even without my mentioning the interchangeable covers and voice-activated dialing.

"Well," he said, nodding eagerly and opening wide the door to his invention; he then indicated that I should climb in. "Let us rock and roll!"

We shook hands before I entered; I was surprised that he didn't salute. Afzal's parting words were, "When the vibrations

stop, open the door and take a look around, taking what mental notes and photographs you want." Patting me on the shoulder as I knelt and climbed inside the box, he finished with, "When you shut yourself back in again, that'll bring you back."

I nodded assent as I squeezed inside, a brief claustrophobia hitting me as I crouched there with my hands around my knees. Then darkness, and a brief and terrifying thought that there probably wouldn't be much air to be had in the close confines surrounding me, and then the walls began to gently and quietly hum.

Sitting there for a minute that seemed far longer, I started feeling cramp, pins and needles stabbing through my feet as I sat waiting for something new to happen. The humming then stopped and I realized that whatever his machine had done, if anything, was done with.

Squirming in the darkness I discovered my tomb's inner handle. Turning it, I expected to find nothing different in the room beyond.

The smell hit me first, the diseased stink of blood and decaying flesh. Then I saw what should've been the floor of Afzal's lab and knew that his invention was indeed on the level.

Beyond the edge of the box the floor was red and slimy, looking like skinless flesh lined with long, glossy strips of blood vessel. As I pushed the door further I peered around the room to discover that everything, from the cabinets against the walls to the walls themselves, was hewn from that same ruddy, sticky-looking gore. Even the computer table, and the equipment atop it, was formed from that unnatural material. It was ugly, smelly and quite impossible to take in; even the screen on the monitor was hewn from red tissue, pulsing as if it were alive.

I said, "Yuck," and then something slick and grisly popped out from behind the computers.

I guessed that it was some kind of trans-dimensional version of Afzal. I was not mistaken.

The entity before me was a skinless travesty of the human form, raw and dripping like a man flayed alive. A face of huge circular eyes, two holes for nostrils, and a wide lipless mouth of thick yellow teeth looked down at me with a leering, rictus grin.

The sight of the apparition, like the appearance of the room, made me feel nauseous to point of vomiting, but still I found myself climbing out from the box to crouch on a floor made of rubbery red flesh. I then stood and confronted the unwholesome creature.

"Arg, sqarg arg." It said, waving its gristly arms around in panic; and if I didn't know better I would have thought that that horrid version of Afzal was more frightened of me than I was of it. Heaven forbid.

Then the creature retrieved an object from the computer table that although looked like a raw sausage, was undoubtedly, by the way he held it, some kind of firearm. That action of his certainly increased my fear factor a hundredfold, despite the horrors mounting up around me. Raising my arms in what I hoped was the universal gesture of pacification, I said a few words that probably sounded as alien to him as his had to me and began backing towards the Uniternative machine.

Too late for me to duck he pulled the phallic weapon's trigger, a beam of yellow light hitting me directly in the eye. Blinded and quite befuddled, I staggered backwards to find myself slipping and falling flat on my backside, banging my head on the box and becoming even more dazed until my vision cleared and I saw the Afzal creature standing over me, gesticulating wildly. Whether because of the bump to my head or perhaps because his ray gun had acted as some kind of translator, I heard him say in my own Afzal's voice, "Oh my God, you get out of here, you disgusting thing!"

Staring up at the gooey face of a creature whose slimy teeth had chattered horribly as it'd spoken, I obeyed, climbing back into the machine and slamming the door tightly shut; I sat back and held my breath in the hopes that something good would happen.

The walls, as before, started to hum and vibrate and the tingling sensation felt good to my disturbed mind. As quickly as it'd begun the vibration ceased and around me there was naught but silence and darkness. Afraid to open the door for fear of what lay beyond, I jumped at the steady knock and Afzal's voice saying, "You there Glynn?" The door was then opened and beyond it lay the tiles and walls of a room formed from wholesome wood and plaster, Afzal's face peering in at me with not a hint of fleshy gore

about it. I burst from that square coffin feeling grateful that the room before me was the same one I'd been in before my journey to that horrible, abattoir world.

As I stood, looking around and feeling relieved but dazed, Afzal poured a barrage of questions onto me. I explained what I'd seen and he was so excited that he didn't even care that I'd forgotten to take any photos. When I got to the part about his alien counterpart communicating with me in English he waved his hands and bobbed his head like a nodding dog before stalking towards the computer table.

"This is absolutely amazing," he said. Walking behind him, I was soon at his side before the monitor and keyboard.

"I just have to go and examine one of these alternate worlds!" He pointed towards his computers. "This time you can man the controls! Here, look."

Despite still being shaken from my encounter, I did my level best to stay focused on what he was showing me on the monitor; it didn't make much sense anyway. The bottom of the screen was taken up by a flowing line graph, atop which sat two yellow vertical bars, moving independently of each other and to the right of a box of flowing binary code. Afzal went on to explain that the bars would indicate when the device had discovered a new dimension, and that they'd be at their highest position when this occurred. My job would be to press the enter key and complete the dimension-jumping process. Shutting the door on the machine apparently instigated the search.

One thing that had been bugging me earlier sprung to mind as he completed the tutorial and I asked, "These new dimensions you want to visit, if there are so many of them, how can you be sure you're coming back to the right one?"

He looked at me quizzically, obviously not understanding my question. Then, "Oh, you mean when I first sent you, how did I know I'd be getting you back?"

I though that was what I'd said, but didn't correct him.

"I've set my device to remain calibrated to the same dimension whilst it is on its first and second cycles," he explained. "Well, apart from when I first brought those objects through. He pointed towards the worktop and I shuddered at the thought of the

weirdest of the three. Then he was off towards the machine before I had the chance to ask him anything else.

"Remember, press the enter key when the bars are full and I'll shout to you when I'm back." In his excitement, he was already shouting. I then tried telling him that he should perhaps consider taking a weapon with him but he waved me off.

Turning as he climbed into the box he gave me a big smile before pulling his legs in.

"Science is not about weapons," I heard him say behind the closing door and I was suddenly alone in the room.

For an aimless time I stood looking at the machine, watching as it started to hum and go through the motions I had missed whilst hidden inside it. The way it worked actually looked quite impressive, the wheel atop the box flashing and flickering with multicolored lights as it spun. I stared at this awhile before realizing that I should be checking on the screen behind me. Turning, I saw that the line graph had formed crazy spikes and the two bars were already at their peak.

After pressing the enter key I turned back to the machine to await what happened next.

The humming continued and the wheel turned. Interesting, but after a while of this monotonous motion I began getting bored. I was about to direct my attention elsewhere when the wheel came to an abrupt stop. The silence was soon interrupted by a muffled noise from the inside of the box.

Wasn't Afzal meant to return on the second cycle? I wondered.

Stepping over to the machine and wondering what the problem was, I began turning the handle; the next thing I knew I was being thrown across the room like a cork from a champagne bottle. I probably would've been propelled a lot further if I hadn't of hit the computer table behind me. As it was, I heard the monitor strike the keyboard with a sound of shattering glass, the mouse and other miscellaneous objects falling around me as I tried to pull my surprised self together.

Seeing the thing crawling from the machine gave me a lot more to worry about.

The creature climbing from the box's interior *was* Afzal for a moment, but beyond the head and shoulders he was a maggoty-torsoed thing mounted atop a dozen insectoid legs. These tapped

against the floor tiles in a hideous tattoo as it strode towards me, smiling at me with Afzal's charming grin and revealing a mouth filled with razor sharp fangs. His eyes bulged with unwholesome intent, his toothy smile quickly forming into a sinister leer.

"You are not the man you used to be," I said to the insect/Afzal conglomeration, but my feeble sarcasm was lost on it.

Hissing loudly, it revealed a long, black, slithering tongue, and began rocking itself back and forth as if readying itself to pounce. I did what any brave adult would do in the same situation: I screamed like a girl and ducked.

It didn't pounce; instead the thing just launched itself towards me on its skinny, yellow legs, me scuttling backwards as it scuttled forward.

I banged my backside against something on my journey away from the monster; almost getting a staple up my arse from the big, chunky, industrial stapler that'd fallen from the computer table. I quickly grabbed it as I backed away from my doom.

The Afzal thing was upon me a mere second after my back touched the wall cabinet, my panic reaching fever pitch as it lunged towards me.

Not usually the kind of person to resort to violence except for in the most drunken situations, I soon found myself shouting in horror as I bashed the monster's head in with the stapler; a red haze of rage guiding me as I attacked it again and again until it lay dead before me. I dropped the stapler, empty of staples but filled to the brim with oozing monster blood.

I took a deep breath and thanked the Lord for creating well-constructed office equipment.

What to do next I didn't know, so, stepping around the corpse, I first walked to the computer table to see what damage had been done. It soon occurred to me that my own Afzal was still out there somewhere, lost and trapped beyond my own dimension.

I had to get him back.

Examining the damage inflicted upon the computer equipment, I discovered that the monitor had been well and truly ruined, black and lifeless and covered in cracks. But not to be perturbed by this technological disaster, I stepped towards the machine, noticing on my way that the insect Afzal had started melting, with a stinky brown puddle forming beneath its icky torso.

I felt quite glad of this, disposing of a monster's corpse would have been such a drag.

My reasoning, as I closed the machine's door, was that despite the fact the monitor could no longer indicate what was happening, the equipment should still function without a hitch. And I *really* wanted my own Afzal back.

Shutting the door I discovered that not only did the machine start to vibrate but also, by bending the handle upwards, the door could be locked from the outside.

Bonus.

With the idea firmly on my mind of waiting as long as it took to get my friend back, I returned to the keyboard and started pressing the enter key, utterly clueless as to what the bars on the defunct monitor screen might be doing.

The wheel turned and the lights flickered, the machine humming as I continuously pressed enter. In grim anticipation, I waited for the wheel to stop, not even daring a guess as to what might appear from the door beneath it. Whilst I waited, I noticed that the creature I'd killed had become nothing more than a brown stain on the tiles and I briefly wondered whether it'd take much cleaning off.

Then there was no time for further distraction as the wheel stopped spinning and joy of joys, I heard distinctly Afzal saying, "Glynn, Glynn, are you out there?"

I headed for the box filled with relief, hearing him say, "Have you locked me in here?" as I pulled the handle down. Backing away with a relieved smile on my face I watched the door open feeling utterly sure that I was to be reunited with the real Afzal.

I could not have been more wrong.

Instead of Afzal, a filthy black cloud came rolling from the box, a thick, roiling mass not dispersing but retaining its integrity as it snaked up towards the ceiling. It came in the form of an oily, snaking form quite obviously not the Afzal of *my* dimension. Discerning terrible shapes within the cloud, blobby conglomerations of eyes, tips of wings and what might've been gaping mouths, I found it all too much to bear. Backing away, I was soon frozen in place as the puffed-up haze of black stopped its ceiling-ward flight to halt above me like a cobra readying to strike.

It did strike, and I almost peed myself in fear as it thrust its knobby top down towards me in a flash of motion.

Falling to the floor, I shrieked as that blunt shape formed itself into an exaggerated version of Afzal's grinning face. With my mouth agape in a soundless scream, it surprised me even more by blowing me a big kiss. The face said, "Koochie-koo," and was gone, gliding through the air above me and tunneling straight through the laboratory door.

After it'd gone, I quickly checked my pants before heading back towards the machine, closing the door in the hopes that I could still summon the real Afzal back to my own world. I felt that I really needed his assistance with that monstrous cloud creature; gone on what ungodly mission I had absolutely no idea. Back then, I knew nothing of the horrors it would perpetrate, but I wasn't so naive as to think that anything but foul play could come from its presence in my dimension.

The machine didn't work, worse luck for me and the poor, lost Doctor Afzal, neither a hum nor a squeak issuing from that dead hulk as I repeatedly tested the door. Checking for loose wires came to no avail either. In the words of the poet, I was well and truly screwed.

Afzal of course, had known of the possibility of other dimensions chock full of alternate versions of himself, but in his naiveté he'd never considered that some of these others might not be using their invention for innocent, scientific pursuits.

Certainly, in the weeks since I released 'Cloud Afzal' into an unsuspecting world, it has done nothing but inflict terror and death, destroying and absorbing all in its path seemingly impervious to our own weapons of mass destruction.

I suppose that my Afzal is dead, possibly in the cloud creature's realm or maybe in one of the other limitless alternate dimensions. Why I was allowed to live, I don't know; perhaps it was a parting gift from the cloud-thing for accidentally freeing it. Maybe it just felt a fondness for the human counterpart of the Glynn back in its own dimension.

As the death toll mounts into the millions and beyond, this thought hardly reassures me. And still the black cloud grows.

Glynn Owen Barrass
October 9th, 2008

About the Author

Unlike the majority of his fiction, Doctor Afzal is not based on a nightmare he's had, although Doctor Afzal does exist in real life, in this dimension and others. This story came to him one night while he was reading a book by candlelight, the image that popped into his head far too horrible to be even included in the story.

Glynn lives in the North East of England and has been writing since 2006. He has written over seventy short stories and poems. His work has been published in dozens of magazines and anthologies including 'Bound For Evil,' 'Candlelight,' 'Murky Depths' and 'Tales of the Talisman.' He is also the author of the novella, "The King of Deadtown," published by Dead Letter Press. He run's the small press-publishing venture Blackgoat Books, which has released three H.P. Lovecraft/Cthulhu Mythos bibliographies, and the chapbook "A Clark Ashton Smith Bibliography and Checklist" which reached the Shocklines.com top ten bestseller list for February 2007.

Details and news of his latest fiction appearances can be found on his website 'Stranger Aeons: The Domain of Writer Glynn Barrass,' and his facebook page.

He shares his home with his cat, Sisko, and a few friendly ghosts he's met over the years.

Insane

Julya Oui

You can't get away from some things, which are meant to be. They have to be fulfilled one way or the other. You may try to hide, or even run, but it will come for you still. It will follow you wherever you go; it will walk in your shadows until such time when you are at your weakest. It will spring out and hunt you down. By then you would be too exhausted to fight back and you will be taken to where you belong and it's not a very nice place.

You wake up one day to find yourself not belonging. You can't fit in. You are caught in a madness of familiarity but you don't know what it means. Your stomach churns ferociously. Your heart beats frantically. You think you are alone and perhaps it's true and you feel yourself losing your sanity, at times, suicidal, but mostly as aimless as a lost dog in a strange city. One day you crack up. You begin to see things that are not there, you feel presences when the place is empty and you think you are going out of your mind.

But you try hard to fit into the scheme of things. You wake up in the morning, you go to work, get caught in the jam and you watch the world go by through the dusty, oil-stained window. You think to yourself that it needs washing soon, and then you see images sweeping by and you notice that everyone else doesn't see what you see. Your hair stands on ends, and goose pimples pop all over your skin, making you feel tingly with fear. You reach the

office and bury yourself in work. It'll all go away, you tell yourself; life will get back to how it was once you calm down. You are just stressed out and depressed and all you need is time off. That will help; it usually does, then again, sometimes not.

You go back home to your family who thinks you are losing it because they can see it in your eyes. You hate yourself for still living with your parents under the same roof but you don't have the courage to go out looking for a cheap apartment where you will be alone most of the time. You tell yourself it will be soon anyhow that you will pack your bags and go be a man. But not yet, not now. You still want to have dinner with mom and dad and that little bratty, spoilt sister of yours. They tell you the house is big enough for all of you and you needn't move until you really want to. You are embarrassed to say it but you don't want to go; you lie to yourself and pretend to look for a place of your own. But it is always the same. The price is not right, the distance is too far, the area is full of creeps and it goes on and on like a sound of void.

After dinner you excuse yourself and plonk down on the chair and start up the computer, playing games to lose yourself for a while. Chatting, if any one of your geeky friends is around, talking about senseless things, which neither add knowledge to your compromised intelligence nor enrich your emotional quotient. If that is not enough to get you through the night, you'll look for free porn and sluttish pictures which you can masturbate on before you sleep. Other than that, you may watch b-grade movies that have nothing but violence, sex, choreographed stunts and idiotic humor. You cannot watch any other because your head is reserved for work and concentrating on the rules of the game of life. You try to sleep but you get nightmares and you see things wandering by in the dark. You switch on the lights and hide under the covers but you know you cannot erase the images from your mind.

In the morning you start your ritual again, but as the days slip away you start to wear dark circles under your eyes and you become disoriented. Losing track of time, forgetting appointments, and worse of all you can't get a hard on anymore. Your distinguishing male assertion that you are so proud of. Your colleagues, your family and even your girlfriend notice the change. They tell you to stop and go for a vacation. You tell yourself you are only hallucinating. They tell you to see the psychiatrist. And you

do everything they tell you to do. This time, the unearthly beings became more sketchy, darker and more frightful.

You cannot look at yourself in the mirror anymore. You see those things everywhere. You can't comb your hair anymore. You don't eat well, and you stop work completely because your boss don't want to overload your mind and tells you to pull yourself together before you go back. Your parents look at you with sad eyes and your girl leaves because she says her old boyfriend insists that they get back together. You lie in bed most of the time, sedated. You hardly go out to meet anyone. And there's always light in your room.

Your little sister peeks in the room to see how crazy you have become and the neighbors draw their curtains tightly when they know you are looking out the window. You try therapy, you try religion, you try drugs but your eyes still see the being that swooshes and swishes by day and night. And then you check on the net for information. They tell you about shadow people, but you see transparent beings instead. You're not sure. You ask one of your friend's cousins who is well versed with the other world and he says they are demons. He says you have done something to attract them to you. He says they watch you while you sleep. Wait for you till you wake so that you can see them.

You get worse dreams now. You wake up frighten and sweaty. You sometimes wet yourself. Then you hear the whispers of people saying you are losing it. The soft floating figures become darker and crude in shape. They are like quick sketches that are scribbled in your dreary eyes. The things now look more horrifying and dreadfully menacing. They are everywhere; sometimes they just pass you by but sometimes they gaze at you, wanting to touch you and caress your face. Every now and then you hear screechy voices from an old vinyl calling for you. It's not exactly your name but it sounds like it anyway.

By this time you lose your job because you can't handle life anymore. You go back to the office to pack up and your colleagues look at you pathetically, sizing up your wretchedness with their probing eyes, but they wish you well anyway. Your boss asks you to take a break until you feel up to coming back to join his task force, but you know that he knows that you are going crazy. All the nice words they utter are mere courtesy and nothing more. When you

walk out of the building everyone swings a good luck wave to you but you can tell that they are saying you belong in the nut house instead. Even the one you can't get along with suddenly seems so philanthropic and affable. You tremor at his handshake and pat on the back because you know you are going down very soon.

You reach home with your bug eyes and ashen facade and you lumber into the house to see your parents and sister waiting for you at the dinner table. The stillness of the air and stuffiness of the people are getting to you and you can't hold back any more. You scream! You ask those unearthly things to stay away from you, and before you can explain to the family, their apprehension of you become too apparent and you know you will soon have to leave. You run up to your room and cry like a baby. No one comes after you because they are scared. You can imagine what they are discussing right now at the dinner table, with their food untouched. They're talking about getting you help because you need it. You scream some more because the jagged looking life forms are now in your room talking to you as it were. You thrash the room to drive them away but they remain as calm as their colored eyes stare curiously at the stupid reaction of yours. You think you see them smile and you beg them to disappear. You call out to God for help but there isn't anything He can do for you. You plunge deeper and deeper into the chasm of your self-made asylum. You lie on bed your and wish you were dead. You dig out some pills and swallow them just to see if you will die. The world spins about like shimmering disco lights. You smile and see those things one last time and you say to them 'You win!' You laugh hysterically as you give up your body, your mind and your soul.

You open up your eyes and see a different room that you are in. You see some people waiting at your bedside, hoping to tell you something. When everything clears you see unfamiliar strangers—some sketchy, some translucent and some regular—but you don't know which are real and which are not. You look at them all and watch them speak to you but there are too many voices coming out at the same time. You think you see your parents but they don't seem very real to you anymore. You hear someone calling your name but it's all so confusing; you don't know what is and what isn't. You try to talk to at least one of them but you can't concentrate. The tranquilizers they give you are starting to take their

toll. Maybe if you sleep it off now you will wake up to what was before all these foolish lunacies. It could be a dream. It could be one of those things you didn't expect to last as long as it lasts. As you drift off into slumber you hear your name being called again but in a different tone, a different rhythm, a different voice.

The moment you stir, you realize they have tied you up and placed you in a room full of padded walls. You now know perhaps you have lost it after all. You think perhaps they are right all along. But deep down inside you know you are not really like that. You still know who you are; you still remember things you have done today and yesterday and a few days back. You can still read and write as though they are nothing but your second nature. You love what you love and dislike what you dislike, but somehow you have seen more than you should and this is the only difference between you and the rest of the world. They can't see apparitions or ghosts or shadowy beings, but you can and you've read about these people who claims to have seen them. Perhaps, now, you realize you should have kept quiet about it or ignored it completely, but you reacted as though you lost grip of reality, so now they bind you up and place you where you can hurt no one, including yourself.

You sit in a corner wondering if this is all the life you are ever going to lead. All these years of growing up and this is what justifies the end? What a waste. If you had not been scared, you would have continued living with the so-called sane people, but then again, you know it wouldn't have lasted. You're not the kind to keep quiet about things, not especially this. You sigh and you want to get out but this is all you're ever going to get. You study your surroundings; maybe you are safe from everything now. The only things that are left in the room are sadness and loneliness. Perhaps it's a price you are willing to pay. You smile. The next thing you know, someone is sitting beside you. You try not to look but you can't resist. Your tears well up but you keep very still. The sedatives have all run out and you are very focused now. You pray, you wish it away, you try to hold it together but then you scream. You let it all out of your system. If they believe you are not one of them anymore you might as well behave like one. You keep on yelling at the top of your lungs to tire yourself out or until the wraith goes away. You swing your head convulsively, you throw yourself against the walls, you stamp your feet and you shriek like a girl. Let it go,

the voice says; let it go, it whispers to you.

It could have been days or months or years that you have been inside that wretched room. All white, all day. No morning, no night; it just is. You've been force-fed pills, food, water and constant therapeutic music. You wish you are dead but no one hears you, no one see you. But you know you are being watched. You're dazed most of the time. You have no idea what existence is anymore. All your defenses are down and you are almost as good as dead, but no one will let you die. Eventually your eyes can't close and your mind can't hide. You see them coming one by one. Now they are clearer, colorful, no more sketchy monsters in your head. They are from all over the world. They wear fantastic clothes and headgears and hairdos and they are real to you now. They reach out for you and tell you to live with them. And that it's all right to let go. You resign yourself and say yes. As they urge you more, you feel light and mobile, as though you are air. It's all making sense now. You are able to leave the temple but you can't go far, not until it releases you. But at least you are free to wander with your new found friends. You can have anything now, but you don't want it. All you want is to be with your friends. As you drift out of your body, you see gray beings trying to make conversation with a breathing bulk of nothingness, an empty shell. You smile and look at the poor souls who are trapped in their want to hang on to something they cannot. You glance at the thing, which was once called John, but now you can be anyone you wish to be.

Julya Oui
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

Julya Oui is a freelance scriptwriter in her home country, Malaysia. She recently won a consolation prize in a playwriting competition (http://www.kakiseni.com) with a story entitled 'Breakfast With The Dogs'. She also has one of her crime stories published in the Thriller UK magazine (http://www.thrilleruk.fsnet.co.uk) and yet another horror story, The Night It Rained Murder, accepted for publication by Chimera World for issue 5:

http://mikephilbin.blogspot.com/2008/06/chimeraworld-5-final-23.html

With a short horror story collection, Bedtime Stories From The Dead Of Night, in the editing phase with a local publisher (http://www.mph.com.my/) scheduled for a year end release, she is busy working on the rewrites while writing scripts for a few other movies and TV series.

She also loves blogging personal incidences, movie reviews, insightful experiences and whatever else that bothers her. Besides getting lost in writing, indulging in reading, immersing in nature, she also likes to live the adventure whenever she can.

The story 'Insane' came about when I experienced a brief madness in my own life (don't we all) and questioned which is the reality of the other. I am always intrigued by the mysteries that we cannot grasp and this is my take of what truly is insanity.

The Hunters

D. Lee

Food is scarce. I keep on the move. I think I even walk in my sleep. No more night lights. Everything is different now.

I pick my path along the dried canal bed. I'm flanked by caked and cracked dirt. Once, water flowed through this bed. It's hard for me to imagine life when water was so plentiful that all living things could come and go to drink as much as they wanted. It's impossible for me to imagine life without the beasts that stalk me day and night looking to prey upon my flesh.

My eyes scan back and forth searching for anything green I can nibble on. I haven't eaten since yesterday and I am weakened. A breeze passes through and I take a moment to close my eyes to embrace the cool relinquishment from the heat. I know there are not many opportunities for enjoyment so I take them when I can.

Before I was pushed out yesterday from the last spot, I had been feeding well. There were three small, twisted trees that bore a small, oblong, purple fruit. The outside was hardened, but the meat inside was soft and chewy. I had fed well until they came.

They're hunting in packs now. I haven't seen them do that before. It's a troubling turn of events. Giving a single one the slip has never been a problem, but if they start working together…

I prop my head just above the canal's edge to scan for anything that could be a promising place for a meal. I see nothing

but desolation. I walk the creek bed until nightfall, and fall asleep on a hungry belly again.

I wake up into another nightmare before the sun begins to rise. We've all had to adapt. I think I've adapted better than most. The rest have gone to the mountains to look for shelter and security in the caves. I've thought more and more about going. It would be nice to have shade. This never-ending heat gets old. I haven't seen a female in at least two and half years, another male in six months.

We may be on the verge of extinction, our population hunted down by those ferocious monstrosities of nature.

I once roamed with my family. I had brothers and sisters. They've been captured and eaten until I'm the only one left.

I walk until mid day and the dried bed opens up into a stunted forest. I know water must fall from the sky here to be able to support this. It's the largest growth of trees I've seen in one place in many years. I'm not in a place to quibble. I need water. There has to be some in this forest. Even if I have to dig up some roots and chew, I need liquid.

I sidestep through the gnarled trees and enter the forest. The smell is stale and putrid. I stop. I think I can hear something in the distance. My breath quickens and I feel the pulse of adrenaline rush through my body. I stand behind some trees for a few minutes. I know there's danger in these woods. If I'm drawn here, then so are the other creatures, but I have no choice. I must get water.

I manipulate my body to avoid the trees and branches while keeping a close eye on the dry twigs underneath. I pause every twenty feet to listen to the sounds of the forest. Everything is quiet.

I keep pushing deeper and deeper. The trees become taller and I nibble at the green on the branches. It doesn't quench my thirst, but it does keep me driving on in search of water.

Snap!

I freeze at the noise. I look at the source, scanning my surroundings furiously for anything to stand out. I see something move. It's obscured by the trees. I slowly duck down. I try to limit my movement. I bend my mind to believe that I'm blending in with the back-drop. I even hug closer to the nearest trunk to hide

my body from view. I move my head around slightly to gain a better vantage point.

I see it clearly now. My heart increases and I force myself to breathe. It's one of them. I can see its slight snout poking past the tree. I dare not move for fear of discovery. I hear its guttural communication. It sounds as ominous as the thunder of an approaching storm. More sounds, a different pitch, coming from deep inside woods. It's communicating to others of its godforsaken kind here in the forest. I feel my legs begin to tremble in fear. If they discover me then my life will be forfeit to their ravenous bellies.

I watch it as it picks up a long stick and inspects it with its beady predator eyes. It turns the stick over in its misshapen hooves. It jerks it up in the air and thwacks it against the tree.

I flinch. Here before me are the creatures responsible for the demise of civilization. These were the ugly beasts that forced my family generations ago to pack up and leave until they were nomads in search of a resting place. Their pale exterior belays their quick intelligence and their penchant for blood. Their appendages are distorted and mutated until their movement is blasphemy against the laws of God. My only saving grace is the slothfulness of their speed, but if they are hunting in packs now, all may be lost.

I hear the sound of falling timber far off to my left. I see the beast's mane whip around until we are both looking dead at one another. It points its hoof and cries.

I take off through the brush at full speed. Branches slap at my face. I know that my legs are my lifeline. I hear the crashing of brush behind me as they follow in hot pursuit. I can tell I am outpacing them and I start making sharp turns to shake them off my trail.

I slow down to catch my breath between two trees. I try to slow my breathing so I can hear over my body's functions. I can hear the plundering of a search far away and off my trail. I try to create some more distance between me and my pursuers.

I come across a muddy shallow puddle and gulp down the water as fast as I can. I strain the dirt with my teeth and gladly swallow the small clumps that come through as well. I drink until there is nothing left.

I pick some more green off the trees and slowly chew. This will have to do until I come across some fruit. I shut my eyes for a moment to regain my senses. A peculiar smell is in the air. That danger sense in the back of my head is rattling my brain. I open my eyes and stand up.

All I know is this place is not safe. That's enough of a hunch for me to leave. That's what has kept me alive this long. I ease toward my left and find a well-traveled path. I start running. I like to stay away from paths but right now I need distance more than camouflage.

I twist and turn along the path. Something is not right about the tree I pass under. I try to slow down but my momentum carries me forward. I go nearer and nearer as I dig my heels into the dirt. I try to flip myself in the other direction.

Before I can turn something falls out of the tree and lands on top of me. It is heavy and I struggle to get out from under it. It pins me down. Out of the forest the beasts materialize. I feel myself panting with exertion. I struggle to break free. I must get out of here. They stalk slowly towards me. I can sense glee in their guttural sounds. They click their odd hooves and roar in happiness.

My muscles have exhausted themselves. The adrenaline is out of my system. These predators have trapped me and now I am at their mercy.

They circle around me to ensure I don't escape. It doesn't matter. I am so tangled in the vines that fell from the tree, there is no getting away. I am at the mercy of their savage fangs.

One swings a heavy stick at my head. I try to duck it, but fail. The stick glances off the side and I am dazed.

I see my family. We are all together in the forests of old. We pick berries and laugh and play as we romp through the endless sea of green. There is a female there. I think she loves me. We nuzzle together, our faces touching in a soft caress. We play in the running water. There is no lack or want of any kind. Life is bliss.

I stir and come to my senses. I am being carried. My legs are wrapped around a stick. I am stuck there. Two beasts carry the stick on their shoulders. We are still in the forest, but I
am unsure of our destination. I try to swing my body loose without garnering any attention.

These viruses are what caused the world of old to disappear. Slowly, they are picking us off one-by-one until there will be nothing left. They will inherit a lifeless desert because of their endless desire for consumption.

They are bigger than I imagined up close. One looks down at me. I shudder at its stringy fur and warped dimensions. It roars. These twisted vermin sprang up from nowhere. I remember the stories my grandfathers passed down. How the twisted one were coming more and more, popping up like a weeds over the fields, and unstoppable. I have never killed one nor heard of anyone killing one. I have given my life up as forfeit. Nothing returns from their lair alive.

The forest opens into a clearing and there are a series of dwellings there. More beasts come out from their hiding until I am surrounded by their murderous screams. I begin to shake with fear and sorrow at my own predicament.

The beasts begin to break up and twirl around. They spin as another spins, almost as if it is some ritual of mating. My carriers keep moving around the dwelling. I see the beasts gathering sticks. They pile them high. They call upon their gods and the sticks burst forth in flame.

The flame rises higher and higher. There are more screams from the beasts. I know they have been touched by God to harness the lightening. God must hate us all to unleash his wrath on this world using this vermin of destruction. My tormentors carry me towards the fire.

They will burn me and eat me. I see this clearly. I look around and begin to sob. But there is nothing to sob about. My world has ended and what is left is such a nightmarish waste I no longer want to be a part of it.

The heat of the flame burns against my hide. Let the beasts eat of my flesh, let them consume. I may be the last, or one of the last. Either way, they will not enjoy too many more days on the flesh of my blood. They will eat until their bellies are full and there is nothing left but dirt. Let them return to it.

I curse these vermin—these humans.

D. Lee
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

D Lee enjoys buttons, things with buttons, and ice cream, though not necessarily in that order. He has been published online at Bartleby Snopes and has a story forthcoming in the Mississippi Crow. He infrequently blogs at myspace.com/writer_dlee and loves to add friends who are complete strangers with the prerequisite that the stranger be an extreme fan of his writing.

He loves all genres, particularly works by Stephen King, Chuck Palahniuk, Christopher Moore, Cormac McCarthy, and the guy who wrote *Everyone Poops*.

He knows we are all faced with increasingly hazardous world issues—global warming, industrialization, and satellite TV—and these issues have changed the way we view the world we live in. He wanted to write *The Hunters* to explore an apocalyptic situation where all creatures would be fighting for survival, not just our species.

He loves Che Guevara, Dwight Schrute, and thinks Dick Cheney should take a hunters safety course.

He is currently finishing his transgressive fiction novel, American Terrorist Manifesto. D Lee lives in Raleigh, NC with his wife, Kris, but longs to one day meet the Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

The Blues in D-minor

David Benton

His black arthritic hands traced over the ebony fretboard with abundant and effortless skill. At times, the two seemed to be melded together, hands and instrument, as if they had danced this waltz throughout eternity. They were two parts that together created a greater whole, sometimes screaming, often weeping, and then laughing with delight as master tickled slave—though who was the master and who was the slave was never entirely apparent.

His name—not his given name but that by which he went—was Blind Willie, living legend of blues guitar. He was in fact blind. His eyes, usually clinched in musical ecstasy, were featureless milky white orbs. They flawlessly matched the mother of pearl inlays on his Fender Stratocaster.

In his time he had played with all of the great ones: Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and B. B. King among many others. His style was unmistakable. He was both smooth and tasteful. No one could make a guitar sing like Blind Willie.

When he sang, he could make angels weep. His voice was rough and soulful. In each word you could feel the pain of every heartbreak mankind had ever known. His voice rumbled low and throaty then wailed like a crying babe, all in the course of twelve bars. There was nothing like it.

I had seen him perform once before, when I was a young

man, perhaps twenty years ago. He hadn't changed with the passage of time. He still wore the same dusty brown suit with a matching big brimmed hat, a single purple feather sprouting from its band. I hadn't been so lucky.

Back then, I still had most of my hair. I could see at any distance without the aid of my glasses, and my face was still smooth and childlike with no blemishes or wrinkles. He was ancient the first time I saw him, and he still was. Now, as then, he sat on a folding chair in the middle of the cramped stage. His guitar perched in his lap. His eyes were clinched in the throes of soulful agony, and his head bobbed from side to side as he cried out his pains with his mouth and his hands.

His band was a hodge podge of local punks. Blind Willie didn't tour with a band. His standard contract called for the clubs to hire back-up musicians. They probably weren't paid, just playing for the opportunity to perform with a living legend. Blind Willie assumed that most of these players knew his material. If not, it was still easy to follow—a shuffle beat, a mojo, a quick change, all 1-4-5, simple stuff.

His guitar was a legend in its own right. A 1958 Fender Strat with a sunburst finish. It was mint, Willie's signature instrument, a guitar he had helped make famous. No one, living or dead, could make it sound like Willie could.

The club was a small dive on the city's eastside, the most fascinating and ancient part of the city. I've visited the place often. It's the only area in town that caters to blues fans like myself. The street outside is always busy, but the buildings have slipped into disrepair, and the sidewalks are dirty and litter strewn.

The club itself is small and poorly lit. For the most part, it's one long room. The bar stretches the length of the place on one side, booths are on the other, and the small stage sits crouched at the far end of the bar. The barstools are all ripped and falling apart, upholstered in brown leather that's dirty and held together with duct tape in some spots. The bar is covered with cigarette burns that have come to resemble alien hieroglyphics; I'm sure many drunks have tried to decipher them over the years. The place has history and you can feel it once you are within its walls. Hundreds of people have passed over its threshold, come in young, come back old, laughed here, fought here, cried here, and lived here in

this tiny club. I am one of them.

That night, I had sipped on a dark, bitter beer while I waited for the set to end. I planned on speaking with the legend I had so long admired. I could have talked to him after the first set, but I hadn't yet consumed enough beer to bolster my courage. So, I'd waited with the dozen or so other blues aficionados, watching the master perform his guitar wizardry through a haze of blue cigarette smoke.

The last call for alcohol had gone out shortly before the music stopped. The small crowd slowly stumbled for the door. I watched as Blind Willie's friend—or perhaps it was his son, an employee, or another blues fanatic whose life had offered nothing better than escorting Blind Willie around—showed the master to a bar stool.

I walked over and sat two stools down. "Great set," I said.

The master smiled appreciatively and nodded while he sipped on a short glass of brown liquor. His vacant eyes stared eerily through the wall behind the bar.

"I saw you the last time you came through town. I guess that was about twenty years ago or so."

Willie turned to face me and, for a brief moment those pale, unseeing eyes filled me with a sense of dread. He must have been approached by the likes of me at least a hundred thousand times. Absentmindedly, I presented my hand, and then realizing my mistake, I withdrew it.

"I, um, have all of your recordings," I stumbled. "I really love your stuff. You're the greatest. Your playing style is so distinctive. You've got perfect phrasing. It's great to see you perform again."

Willie turned back towards the wall and he took a sip of his drink. "Un huh," he murmured. "You a musician or somethin'?" he asked without looking at me.

"Yeah, sort of. Not like you or anything, but I used to play around a little on the guitar."

Willie nodded as the man behind the bar interrupted our conversation.

"Great set, Willie. But it was a little slow tonight," the barkeep said, handing over a small handful of bills. Willie took the cash, folded it, and stuffed it into the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Sorry," the man continued. "But if you're ever coming through town again, let me know and we'll set something up. Okay?" Willie nodded, the sliver of a smile on his face.

Then the barkeep turned to me. "Hey buddy, it's time to go."

"He's with me," Willie said, and the man gave me a hard stare before he turned away and began to wipe down the counter.

"So, you a guitar player, huh?" Willie said to me.

"Yes sir."

"Let's hear what you got."

Willie stood and motioned toward the guitar. "Go ahead, pick 'er up. She don't bite. At least not if you treat her right." Willie smiled his thin crack of a smile.

Reluctantly, I stepped up on the small stage and plucked the Strat from its stand. It felt good in my hands. The thin neck, the light body, the silver strands of the six strings, all brought back my memories of playing when I was a younger man. My hands began to strum on their own. Playing the guitar is like riding a bike: you may get rusty, but you never forget. The notes sounded thin and tinny.

"Go ahead, turn on the amp," the master prompted.

I turned and clicked the switch on the old 20-watt tube amplifier behind me on the stage. It hummed and crackled as it came to life. Again I placed pick on strings, only now their sharp tinny twang had budded into beautiful sonorous notes as if they were produced on heavenly harps. I began with a finger tremolo on the high E, then descended into my turn around and a mid tempo blues riff. Willie nodded his approval.

I stopped after about a dozen bars. Willie turned to his attendant. "Bring the car around, would you, Dex?"

Now the bar was empty, except for Willie and me. The hodgepodge band had left without a word, out the back door while the blues master and I had talked. The crowd had left when the club had closed shop. And the barkeep must have descended into the storage room to take stock of his alcohol or snort some cocaine. The legend and I, alone, took up where we had left off.

"That was pretty good son," Willie said. "You're all right."

"Thanks. I've got a Les Paul at home, but this guitar is totally different. It's so much lighter and more responsive." I looked down at the Strat with reverence.

"Yeah, she's a beauty alright," Willie said. "Me and her been through a lot together. I can't tell you how much of my blood, sweat, and tears went into that guitar. You could say me and her got a history together. But it ain't the guitar makes you a great player, and it ain't in the fingers either; it's your soul."

I listened attentively, realizing that I was about to get a music lesson from a living legend. I had dreamed of a moment like this for most of my life. Now that it had arrived I was at once elated and terrified.

"Playin' guitar's like makin' love. If what you put into it's cheap, what you get out of it's cheap. Technique don't mean nothin'. It's all in the feelin'. You gotta pour your soul right into your playin', bundle up your feelin's so that your guitar can feel 'em, then your audience can feel 'em, then everybody that hears you can feel 'em. Now, go ahead and try again, but with your heart this time."

I took a few deep breaths of the stale, beer-enriched air to calm myself. I didn't want to disappoint the maestro.

"Don't think," Blind Willie prompted. "Feel."

I began to play, trying hard to unlock the passions of my soul. Under the unseeing gaze of Willie, the embers of my emotions started to smolder then combusted into a bonfire of sorrows. It was as if the master somehow controlled me, like a puppet on unseen strings. I could feel the flames of anguish growing in my chest, sending electrical pulses through my arms and into my hands. Though my playing hadn't improved technically, it sounded somehow more alive. I had the oddest sensation of flying, soaring high above the world and all of the pains it had inflicted on me. Willie watched me with blind eyes, a smile looking like a length of wire pulled taut across the skin of his face.

"Good, good," the legend said when I had finished, "You see, I been around a long time, and I felt the pains of a thousand different peoples, reachin' out to me in the dark. The pain of a mother with a sick child. The pain of a man who can't find no job. The pain of every person livin' in this wicked world. Every person I comes across has some pain, and I bundle it up and put it in my playin'. Now even you, a man who feels the pains of never realizing his dream of playin' music, you will be a part of my playin'."

A horn sounded in the alley behind the building; Willie's

ride had arrived.

"Well," the master said, "you mind helpin' me pack up my stuff?"

"No, not at all," I said as I began to place Willie's Stratocaster in its case. I turned off the amplifier and sealed the Strat in its coffin, wound all of the cables and slid them into a compartment in the back of the amp. All the while I had an empty feeling deep inside. When I had been playing my emotions had risen up from my soul, and then Willie's words had whisked them away. Where my heart had soared only moments before there was now a void. I wondered if I could ever feel anything the way that Willie did.

"Could you show me to the door?" Willie asked me and, of course, I obliged.

"How do you keep it up?" I asked, somewhat absentmindedly, while I helped lead him down the hall to the back door. I held his guitar case in my right hand and his amp in my left. His cold hand gripped my right elbow, and for some reason it compounded my feelings of vacancy. "I mean touring? A new town every night, your days on the road."

"I guess you could say that I'm addicted to the night life," Willie said while I led him out the back door, and down the steps to the alley and his waiting car. His ride was a '74 Cadillac hearse, the original hatch back. It was white with dark tinted windows— white wall tires shining in the lamp light like a new penny. Willie's attendant held the large rear door open. I placed Willie's equipment in the back; a coffin still rested there.

"Well. I guess I'll see you next time I come around," Willie said, and he smiled a wide toothy grin. It was the first glimpse I'd had of his teeth. They were old and yellowed and long and sharp. With that, Willie climbed into the hearse, and he and his attendant disappeared down the alley.

I wanted to stop him, I wanted to go with him, I wanted to follow him to the ends of the earth, and I was sure he knew where they were, but he was already gone to another town, or another world, and I have felt nothing since.

David Benton
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

When he's not playing bass guitar at some seedy dive in or around Milwaukee, WI. David Benton occasionally spits out a piece of dark fiction. Most notable are his collaborations with W.D. Gagliani that appear in Dark Passions: Hot Blood Volume 13 and the German anthology Masters of Unreality.

Mary

Samantha Sterner

A home with mottled stone walls and a fire inside no matter how warm it grew outside.

A husband gone.

A child.

These are the three constants in my memories. Everything else comes and goes as regularly as a flower's bloom. They're still somewhere. There's not enough time or space to ever lose them.

All I have to offer are a few fragments, a few stray flowers, dying and fading fast.

♠

"Lily loves Matthew," they taunted from the swings. "Lily loves Matthew," they taunted from the monkey bars, the slide, the merry-go-round. Lily sat with her hands crumbled up under her chin, crying. Matthew looked embarrassed and promptly resorted to hitting the boy who had started it. The teaching assistant was perched on the top of the metal picnic table made for small children, making her fat 5'10 frame look even larger than usual. She looked up once in a while from the latest Babysitter's Club book she'd stolen from the lost and found bin.

The children grew bored and began playing Harry Potter. Running around with sticks in their hands, Matthew and the rest of them shrieked nonsensical words and chased each other.

Lily sat under the lone bush in the corner where two sides of the wire fence met. From time to time she peered out enviously through the leaves, which were a moldy brown even though the trees above shone with hints of red and yellow. She waited until recess was over.

♠

Green ivy grew up the trees and spread to the house. Now people grow angry when this happens. They pull it off with their hands, wrapping the hard vine around their fingers and tugging until their hands are left swollen and covered with slick clear blood that does not belong to them. Unless they can afford servants to do it for them. Things have changed, but people still are quick to hire underlings to do any work that results in sweat or blood.

I had few servants. Delia had pale skin and eyes that glinted like an opossum's. She did the wash and nursed the child. She was not yet old, but she had more years than my twenty.

An old man named Thomas took care of the garden and land. A young man whose name escapes me, but who had the delicate features of a Greek nymph, he sometimes brought me medicine and healing herbs when the physician couldn't come, which became more and more frequently towards the end. Physicians rarely grace all homes with equal favor.

My child was sick from the minute he was born. Even after they washed the blood and bile from him and wrapped him in soft wool, he would not stop crying. His face and body never took proper form, and stayed misshapen from his journey. He grew but never righted, and I kept him hidden indoors so the townspeople could not see.

"The Lord burdens only those who can handle it Miss," Delia advised from where she stood grinding powders in her mortar. "Sometimes bad things happen to the most innocent ones."

I took walks at night along the richly green hills where I scraped the bark off trees with the glistening knife Delia used in the kitchen. I made remedies and poultices. When things grew worse,

I sold my ruby broach and gave Thomas the money to bribe the minister to look the other way while he dug up the remains of my grandmother. I washed my child in a bath tinted with fawn's blood, and dried him off with my ancestor's burial shawl, just as Delia advised. I was a good mother.

My husband was a tall man who prided himself on his hunting skills. The kitchen table was always occupied with some beast or another he had snuffed the life of. When I went to him in his bed, even after he wiped the traces of the day's hunt from his hands with linens Delia would wash later on, he smelled of meat freshly killed. He bred horses and could ride like the devil. He scared those who did not know him, with his rough appearance and thick ragged red beard, but inside he was just a man.

A man who boasted and bragged of his indifference to his heritage, to the family he opposed only once in his life—the day he married me. The daughter of a home long divided. Of a home which malice talk clouded, until it became a hill in the night. Hidden, but you know it is there.

I wondered though, why he should keep his family portraits in our home. If he was so uncaring to them. To all but me and the child, as he told me once, placing his large and clean—but not clean—palm on my swollen belly. We would be all he needed he said. But I wondered about the portraits. And I wondered even more, after he saw the baby.

But no, I will believe he was a good man, and would have come back if he had been able.

♠

Vicky's mother threw her a birthday party on a Saturday. Vicky turned ten.

Her mother insisted on inviting everyone in her class to the party. Vicky whined, but her mother remained firm on the subject. A few missed birthday parties had struck a little too deeply in the mother's own memories.

Lily stood silent in the corner, watching as everyone played pin the tail, as they played in the pool, as they cut and ate cake. Lily was nervous, as she had been even before walking through the balloon-lined doorway, for all the girls were to spend the night at

Vicky's. She had never done this before and was worried she would mess it up by doing the wrong thing. So instead she did and said little to nothing.

They opened the presents. All of the girls' presents to Vicky were wrapped in her favorite colors—pink and purple—except for Lily's which was white with blue rockets. After unwrapping the others (dolls and plastic jewelry from the girls, DVD's and board games from the boys) Vicky reached the last present. Vicky opened Lily's present slowly, as if afraid the small girl had wrapped up a dead kitten for her to find, and pulled out a book called *The Indian in the Cupboard*, a book that didn't have princesses or dressed-up little girls on the cover, but a tan man who was almost naked. Vicky stared at it and than at Emily. Vicky said an expressionless thank you. Once her mother's back was turned, Vicky turned and gave Lily her real reply, a smile that was hard and sharp like a slap.

Eventually the boys left, fleeing from the girlish secret rituals they knew were coming. The girls watched *Aladdin*. Vicky grew bored as Aladdin disguised himself in the robes of a rich man. She thought Aladdin was getting too much of her attention.

"Let's tell scary stories!" Vicky declared. A few of the other girls whimpered no, they didn't like scary stories. Then Vicky's eyes fell on Lily, pathetic, ugly Lily, who was in the corner, watching but not speaking.

"I have a better idea," Vicky said.

♠

My husband rode off one morning to defend our land and he never rode back. Dead, the neighborhood tramps whispered. Some of the nastier ones hinted that perhaps he had just left me. Don't think I couldn't hear them, as I stood in line at the butcher's stall, as I crossed the street to enter the apothecary. But I've always ignored people like that. Let the silly birds speak their nonsense, my mother used to say.

Though sometimes, against the wisdom of my mother, I heard those mean-spirited voices at night, when I went to my child. Without even a letter from my husband, yes, I heard those malicious thoughts echo inside my own mind often enough.

Perhaps that is why Delia had to order more wine than she had when my husband was home.

My husband left me with only Delia and one man too old and one man too young for protection.

"Young Miss don't worry yourself," Delia said, on those days where I walked and walked along the fields, forgetting to come in for supper. "Everything will go back to being just as it always was."

And that child, he never gave me rest. He cried no matter what I did, no matter how much I tried. Thomas carved him toys out of rich birch wood, Delia fed him cow's milk with sugar, and I rose every night and walked with him back and forth alongside the cold stone walls of his room, waiting for him to return to sleep. My son's walls were covered in the family portraits of my husband's line. He had wanted the boy to be surrounded by his own. None of my family portraits were in our house. As though the past could be banished as easily as that.

Maybe if my baby had been beautiful I could have forgiven him. I had a white furry kitten when I was young, who was wicked as a sprite, but wonderful to look upon. My mother used to remind me, usually after I tried to pet it and received a hiss or scratch in return, that beauty does not mean goodness. But I think if my child had been handsome, and his appearance did not cause me to wince whenever I looked upon him, I would have loved him more.

Still, I did love him. For some days he would behave like an angel. I put him down on the carpet in front of the fire, and he giggled as I held my mother's old jewels in front of him. He laughed and clapped his hands as the fire's embers brought out the hidden gleams and sparkle of the necklaces.

Other days I sat with him in the kitchen with Delia. He watched as we rolled out dough and he played in the flour. He was a good child.

One night I rose to check on him, and Delia was already there. I came across the two of them in the chair in his room, the child fast asleep in her arms, an almost maternal look upon Delia's narrow face. That night all was silent, and I slept wrapped in quilts as I had not since I had been a young girl in my father's house. I slept as if I could grow used to a silent child.

I know what those tramps said. But Delia was not a witch. And neither was I.

♠

"It's really very simple," Vicky said.

Lily stood in the center of the girls now, shoved from her place on the sidelines.

"You have to go into a dark room and call her name thirteen times into the mirror."

"But how can you see the mirror if it's dark?" one of the other girls asked.

"You use a candle," Vicky said.

"Do you have a candle?" The girl asked.

"Well no," Vicky admitted. She thought for a minute. "But I'm sure a flashlight would work too."

A flashlight was brought out and handed to Lily, who stood looking at it as if it would come alive and bite her.

"You have to." Vicky said. She didn't bother adding, "Or we won't like you anymore," for she never pretended to have liked Lily in the first place.

♠

A man too young stood besides me when we cast my child into the ground. Not my servant, who was no longer needed by that point, but the young minister. Only a few others were there. The physician, Delia, and two townswomen that kept their gaze on me, even when the minister bowed his head towards the grave. Even when the dirt was shoveled.

I wrote a letter to my absent husband. There was no reply. I did not think of him. I could not.

I wish I could tell you that I behaved lovingly and well like the graceful women in books. I wish I could tell you that I cried and dabbed at my eyes and implored the Lord to send me strength. I wish I had been more like my own mother had been at my father's funeral.

I stood silent and cold, apart even from myself and in no way connected with that tiny coffin which would be lowered and

whose wooden exterior would soon decay, leaving the contents to be eaten by worms, ruined by roots, and destroyed by snakes.

Delia stood behind me. I turned back during the short service befitting a short life, and saw her red animal eyes glinting, even though the day was cloudy.

I know what the tramps said of her. But Delia never acted on her impulses, whatever they may have been. It was known how a few years back one of the serving men of the manor across town had asked her to run away with him. A short little man whose right leg was a good deal longer than the left, but who had thick dark hair that always gleamed as if freshly washed, and whose eyes, although they were too close together, were of a deep blue, and large enough to draw even the attention of ladies. Not a bad bargain on the whole, for a woman like Delia. But she refused him, and he left our town on his own.

If he had told Delia, commanded it of her, to leave with him, instead of asking, perhaps she would have gone.

The townspeople whispered ugly things about Delia and me. Just like the others had whispered when my father died. The same cruel insinuations that had been said of my poor mother. They whispered of malice, of sin, of poison.

♠

"Go on Lily, go on," Vicky ordered.

Lily stood still, panicking, her eyes begging what her voice could not.

"Why does she come? I mean who is she?" one of the girls asked, from curiosity or pity for Lily.

"I don't know; she's just some lady," Vicky said impatiently. "Some crazy lady who killed her baby. Now go on."

And then Lily was in the dark bathroom, her hands shaking and holding up a tiny blue flashlight. She shined it at the mirror, seeing only her own reflection, her big nose and fat cheeks taking up all of the light. The light was thin and yellow, and began to fade slowly from the second it was switched on.

"Are you saying it?" Vicky yelled through the door. The other girls were giggling.

Lily looked at her ugly face, she looked at the fear in her own eyes. I will say it, she thought. I won't be afraid anymore.

♠

They drove Delia out of town with their menace and hatred. Those tramps that had never before seen my baby, whispering to each other about the way my baby looked as it was placed into its last resting place. Whispering that it looked different from the other children that succumbed to sickness. That it looked unnatural.

Alongside those cold walls, back and forth every night, but he always kept crying. He cried at every new toy we brought him, he cried as if trying to scold me, to tell me that it was not a toy or a place he wanted, it was a person, his father, that he wanted, and I as a woman, even though I had birthed him, even though I had walked in the rain and winter to clumsily scrape the bark off trees, even if I had cut myself and fed him my own blood in a healing mixture, I was not what he wanted.

Those who said my baby was not sick until I made him so, I would have them view those nights. I would have them give up all rest to walk along those walls covered in eyes that I sometimes mistook for my husband's, especially on the nights I partook in wine. My husband's eyes along his ancestors, watching his young, foolish wife and his malformed baby.

Perhaps not one night in particular though – that one I would keep away from their eyes, both the tramps' and my husband's, quick to jump to accusations as they are. Delia reaching me, as I rocked my child, reaching me, her animal eyes flashing once in the fire's glow, bending over the bundle in my arms.

"Something is wrong here Miss," she said, "The child isn't breathing."

My child died and then I died not long after. Guilt, the tramps declared. Driven mad, some of the kinder ones decided. No one left to tell them anything different. In the churchyard, the ivy spread from the trees to our headstones and grew thick over both of our graves. Now I would have no one pull it off.

♠

"Lily," Vicky said, knocking on the door which wouldn't open.

"Bloody Mary," Lily said for the thirteenth time.

"Lily what's going on in there? Speak up," Vicki said.

Lily stood in front of the mirror, shining her flashlight onto it, the yellow light dimming as it jumped across the mirror's refection of the dark room, searching.

"Mary?" Lily whispered one last time.

"Lily! Come out now!" Vicki said. And she and the other girls waited for the door to open.

♠

Some days I can remember more than others. Though I suppose days no longer apply to me. Time does not matter.

But you were asking me something. A question about a child. A question about children.

I would answer. It depends on my memories, and if anyone has been tending the graves at one churchyard in particular. But perhaps in the cold of winter, as the ivy dries up and slivers to nothing, I could tell you everything.

All you have to do is ask.

Samantha Sterner
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

Samantha Sterner lives and writes in North Carolina, where she is working on finally graduating and receiving her Bachelor's in English and Psychology. She is only able to write because of generous support from her family, who love her despite her low-paying career choices.

Even as a child, Samantha knew that there are some names you should never say, once the daylight fades.

Sometimes I Almost Feel Like a Real Human Being

David Wesley Hill

Courtney became best friends with Mary Beth in order to learn her secrets. But she didn't discover the most important one. It was Sam who found that out. He crawled from his basement tunnel and began bouncing excitedly. Dirt showered everywhere like water off a wet dog.

"I know it, I know it," he said.

"Know what?" I asked.

"What she did, Frank. What Mary Beth did."

Even when he stands upright, Sam's head barely brushes my knee. It is as round as a pumpkin and disproportionately large for his body. His eyes are the shape and color of egg yolks and his mouth is crammed with broad, flat teeth. Sam has many talents. He can mimic any sound he hears. And his sense of smell is extraordinary. Perhaps this is because his nose is so immense that the tip actually touches his chin.

"What did Mary Beth do?"

Except for the corner where Sam had dug the entrance to his tunnel, most of the basement is finished. The walls are paneled with fake wood veneer and the floor is covered with plastic tiles that imitate real brick. Against one wall are a washer and dryer and a cabinet of laundry supplies. Against the other is the old couch on

which I was sprawled. I was bored. I'm always bored. Sometimes it seems like I've been bored for centuries. My whole entire life.

Sam didn't answer directly. He isn't very smart and he has trouble holding onto a line of thought.

"I was hungry, Frank. Really, really hungry. And this big old rat, he was too fast. I didn't catch him until he was inside Mary Beth's house."

Sam's tunnels lead everywhere across the neighborhood. There's not a home he doesn't have access to for at least a half mile in every direction.

"Well?" I asked.

"He was nice and juicy."

"Not the rat, Sam. Mary Beth."

"Oh, her. Well, I knew what was up right away. The stink was that strong, Frank. Even you could smell it."

"Smell what, Sam?"

"Mary Beth. She's pregnant."

♠

Courtney said, "I can't believe she didn't tell me. I mean, what are best friends for?"

We were sitting at the kitchen table having a breakfast of cereal and toast and orange juice. We had to be at school in half an hour. Courtney was wearing jeans and a tight knit shirt without a collar. She was chewing gum and eating at the same time. I couldn't figure out how she managed not to swallow the gum. In many ways Courtney is as talented as Sam.

"Maybe Mary Beth doesn't know herself," I said.

"Get real, Frank. Of course she knows. She has to. Sam says she's in her sixth month."

"Almost too late for an abortion," I said.

"Mary Beth wouldn't have one anyway. They're Catholics."

"Who's the father?"

"Brad Vogel. Has to be. They've been going steady since eighth grade. But Mary Beth says they haven't gone all the way."

"Maybe she was lying."

"No, I don't think so. There must be some other explanation."

"It's been two thousand years since the last immaculate conception."

"Don't remind me, Frank."

Dad joined us in the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee from the pot warming on the countertop. Dad's in software development. He used to be in armaments but he got out of that business. He was dressed for work in his usual gray pinstripe suit and black wingtip shoes with the built-up right heel that prevents most people from noticing his limp. If they do, he tells them he had polio when he was a kid. This is not the truth. Dad's always been lame.

He asked, "What are you two looking so serious about?"

"My friend, Mary Beth, is pregnant," Courtney answered.

"So what do you have in mind?"

"We don't know yet," Courtney answered.

"I'm thinking about it," I said.

♠

Brad Vogel was seventeen but seemed younger. He was into computer gaming and since there is little I can't do with electronics, it was easy to impress him with my expertise. We went to his house after school and settled down with a couple bags of chips before his computer and took turns playing death matches on-line.

"I don't think they've had sex," I told Courtney. "What I suspect happened is they were doing some heavy petting and accidentally got a little too close. I don't believe he even knows she's pregnant."

"How do you suppose he'll react to the news?"

"There's only one way to find out."

We carried the telephone to the basement and explained to Sam what we wanted. His grin was so wide that it almost split his head in half. I dialed the number since he has stubby claws instead of real fingers.

"Mrs. Vogel?" Sam said in an adolescent female voice. "Yes, it's Mary Beth. I'm fine, thank you. Is Brad there? Sure, I'll hold. Brad? Of course, it's me. How can you ask if something's the matter? Yes, I'm crying. We have to talk, Brad. Yes, now. I'm

pregnant, Brad. Of course, I'm sure. Don't be stupid. Who do you think? Half an hour. I'll leave the porch door open."

I clicked off the receiver and Sam said: "That was fun, Frank. Real fun. I did good, didn't I?"

I dialed Mary Beth's number and gave the phone back to Sam. His voice was indistinguishable from Brad Vogel's.

"Hi, Mary Beth, it's me. Well, I'm OK, but there's something I've been meaning to ask. No, no, nothing like that, it's what you haven't told me…. Please, don't start. I can't bear to hear you crying. Yes, that's better. We'll talk. No, no one else knows. It's just I noticed you were gaining weight. All right. I'll be over. Leave the porch door open."

This time Sam was so excited that he got down on all fours and started chasing rats. As small as Sam is he was still much larger than the rodents and soon his groin was messy with blood and fur.

The squealing got on my nerves and I went upstairs. Courtney remained behind until her favorite television program came on.

♠

Sam wired Brad's and Mary Beth's rooms so we could record their conversations. Brad wanted to tell their parents about the pregnancy but Mary Beth didn't. She was a big girl and she was sure that if she wore loose clothing no one would guess her condition. Brad was less certain. Neither had much idea what to do with the baby after Mary Beth gave birth.

Dad was sitting on the couch in his boxer shorts like he does every evening after work. He was finishing his third glass of the vodka he keeps in the freezer until it becomes as thick as syrup.

Brad was visiting Mary Beth. We had coupled the microphones in their rooms to our home entertainment center and their voices came clearly through the stereo speakers. Brad was saying:

"Of course, I love you, Mary Beth. How could you think I don't?"

"But you want to ruin my life."

"I'm only saying it might be better if we got help."

"My mother will kill me. She'll really kill me. You don't know her."

"Let's think about it." Brad didn't sound convinced.

Dad scratched absently at the thigh of his thin leg and took a swallow of vodka. "The boy's scared," he observed.

"They're both scared."

"He needs to be able to justify keeping the pregnancy secret," Dad went on. "Otherwise he'll tell his parents."

"I think you're right," I agreed.

So the next afternoon I met Brad after school and we went to his house and slipped a game into the computer.

"You ever notice—" I began.

"Notice what, Frank?"

"Well, all the heroes, all the real heroes in the good games, I mean, there's always something mysterious about how they're born. Either some god was screwing around with their mother. Or else they're foundlings. You know, left on a doorstep by their parents, who can't keep them for one reason or another. Maybe there's a rule about it. Like, you can't be a true hero with an ordinary mother and father."

Brad's eyes became distant. They held so much innocence that I wanted to steal them from their sockets and cradle them in my palm.

"You really think so, Frank?" he asked. "There's a rule?"

"I'd bet on it."

♠

Mary Beth called Brad when she felt the first contractions. The motel they'd picked out lay a couple miles down the state road beyond the town limits. Sam had wired the entire place since we couldn't know what room they'd be given. We switched channels until we tuned in on them. It was not an easy labor but they were left alone since it was the kind of establishment where unusual noises are attributed to energetic sexual activity.

"Push," Brad said. "One more time."

"I'm pushing."

The groan Mary Beth made mingled pain and effort and deep satisfaction. After this we heard the wail of a newborn. Mary Beth said, “Let me hold him.”

“Just for a little while, Ok?”

“He’s so small, isn’t he, Brad? Oh, I wish we could keep him.”

“Come on, Mary Beth. You know we can’t. We’ve gone over this a thousand times. Look, I’ll get the bassinet ready.”

I stood up and said, "I'd better leave now."

"Can I come, too?" Courtney asked.

I shrugged and pulled on a jacket. Twilight had faded to night and a chill November wind snapped sheets of rain against the pavement. A walk of ten minutes brought us to St. Luke's Church. We waited around the corner against the overgrown hedge that framed the rectory. The shrubbery screened us from observation while allowing a good view of the front steps. Just past nine an old Civic pulled up before the church. Brad got out of the car. He didn't notice us. He leaned inside in order to take out the cradle with his son in it.

For a moment he stared into the cradle. It was easy to guess what he was thinking. For Brad, giving up the child had mystical significance. He was ensuring the boy an extraordinary future. Like in computer games.

Brad placed the bassinet in front of the entrance under the overhang and out of the rain. Then he hurried down the steps and gunned the car away from there. I immediately went to the church and took the bassinet and brought it to Courtney in the shadow of the hedge. Together we peered at the baby.

His eyes were so blue as to seem black. He looked at us fearlessly. There was such wonder and delight in his regard that for the briefest instant I almost felt like a real human being.

"Isn't he the cutest thing," Courtney said. She blew a huge bubble.

"Sure is," I replied.

I reached into the cradle and strangled him. Then I cut off his left ear and tucked it in my pocket.

I replaced the bassinet with the dead body before the church door and Courtney and I returned home.

♠

"I want to report a crime," Sam said in a woman's voice. "Yes, well, I think there was a crime, but I'm not one hundred percent sure. I could be wrong. What? What does my name have to do with anything? I'm simply a good citizen, is that so hard to believe? Anyway, my point is, I was visiting a friend at the Seven Oaks Lodge, out on the state road, and I couldn't help but hear all sorts of funny noises coming from a couple doors down. Number seventeen, I think it was. What? Oh, I don't know, like crying and maybe like someone was being slapped around a little. I didn't make too much of it, that's how the Seven Oaks is. Only I started wondering if maybe I heard a child in there. Now that surely isn't any place for a child. There's all sorts of goings on."

"Very good," I told Sam. "Now this time you're a man." I dialed the police again. In a masculine voice he said:

"There's been a murder. No, I didn't see it myself. Let me tell you what happened. I was walking by St. Luke's Church over on Montgomery, and I saw an old Honda pull up. A kid got out. He was carrying a box or something and he left it on the church steps. I didn't think nothing of it, but there was something odd about the kid, you know how it is, and after he left, I opened the box. Only it wasn't a box. It was a cradle. There was a dead baby in it. The son of a bitch dropped off a dead baby like a damned bundle of used clothes. Sure, I got the license plate. Let me tell you what it was."

♠

Brad and Mary Beth were arrested for murder. The news made the national papers because the district attorney decided to press for the death penalty even though they were juveniles. But the charges were bargained down to manslaughter. I visited Brad while he was out on bail before sentencing.

"Mary Beth is sure I did it," he told me. We were sitting on the edge of his bed, in his room in front of the computer, but the machine was off. "She hates me. She won't talk to me."

"Well, you did plead guilty."

"Only because no one believed my story. They told me if I said I was innocent, and was convicted anyway, I might get the

chair or a lethal injection or something. So I had to say I did it. What other choice was there?"

"I don't know, Brad."

"That baby was alive when I left him at the church. I swear it. Why would I kill my son? Why would anyone kill a baby? And steal his little ear?"

"Maybe someone had it in for you," I said. "Maybe it was all a set up, Brad. They were keeping you and Mary Beth under observation. Watching you all the time, just waiting for the right opportunity to frame you both. Probably you were followed from the motel. They killed the baby as soon as you left him at the church. And after that they let the police know where you were."

Brad looked at me like I was crazy.

"Now why would anyone go to all that trouble?" he asked.

"Maybe they wanted to see you suffer for something you didn't do."

Brad shook his head slowly. "You've been playing too many computer games, Frank. The real world doesn't work like that. I've learned the truth now. Probably what happened is some sick bastard, some psychopath, was passing by. That's all. It was chance. Bad luck. Nothing more."

"If that's what you believe, Brad," I said, "who am I to argue?"

♠

Mom's a terrible cook and never gets any better. I doubt she'd get any better even if she tried for another thousand years. The frozen green beans were still cold in the middle and the turkey was dry on the outside while at the same time being underdone. Sam crawled onto the table and stuck his head into the cavity and munched happily at the raw meat. Dad carved around him. Courtney blew a bubble and said:

"Mary Beth got two years since they said she was only an accessory. But Brad was sentenced to four."

"I spoke with him last week," I said. "I told him what happened. Only he thought I was making it up."

"Never underestimate the human capacity for rationalization," Dad observed.

"Even now Brad doubts evil exists," I continued. "He thinks life is all just circumstance."

"An existentialist, is he?" Dad asked.

"He considers himself a cynic."

Mom was chewing deliberately at the turkey. She dislikes her own cooking as much as we do. "So how will you change his mind?" she asked.

"Well, first I'm going to wait about four years. Until just before he's served his sentence."

"And then, Frank? And then?" Sam popped his head from the turkey and wiped grease from his eyes.

"I'll send him the tapes we made of him and Mary Beth."

"And the ear, too, Frank," Sam said. "Don't forget the ear. That'll really do it."

I took the tiny scrap of flesh from my pocket and rubbed it between my thumb and forefinger. For a fleeting instant I was reminded of that fragile second when I had felt alive. But it didn't last. I was bored again.

"And the ear, too," I said.

David Wesley Hill
October 9th, 2008

About the Author

David Wesley Hill lives in New York City and makes a living as a web designer and programmer. In 2006 he was awarded a residency at the Blue Mountain Center, and in 2007 he delivered a paper to the International Conference of SF and Fantasy in Chengdu, China, where his fiction is well received. A Writer of the Future winner, David's stories have appeared in such magazines and anthologies as *Aboriginal SF*, *Black Gate*, *Read by Dawn*, and *Best of the Rest.* His long-form SF is represented by Shawna McCarthy.

Empty

Aaron A. Polson

They schemed in Jack's small, two-man tent one clear and chilly night in late September. Jack, as owner of the tent, held the flashlight as they studied the small hand-scribbled map—the map that his friend created through a blend of his own imagination and the layout of windows on the exterior. Max, the map maker, still burdened with too much baby fat on his preteen frame, pinched the center of his small wire-framed glasses.

"I don't know, Jack," he said, his voice high and clear, farther from puberty than Jack's own occasional squeak.

"C'mon Max. We haven't seen anybody around there in months—not since the old coot had a heart-attack. Aren't you the least bit curious what's in that place?" Jack brought the flashlight underneath his chin, casting grotesque shadows around his eyes, mouth, and nose. "Or are you frightened?" he asked, mocking Max with a ghoulish moan.

Max studied him, unwilling to yield to Jack's ridicule. "No, I'm not scared. It's just, well—this is breaking and entering we're talking about."

"What did you think we were going to do when I had you draw up those maps? What is it your buddy Ellis always says about that place?" Just then, something struck the canvas wall of the tent with a dull thump. "What the hell was that?"

Max pinched his glasses and said, "I dunno, but it was probably attracted by the light. Did you know there are living things, mostly insects and single-celled organisms that move only…"

"Stuff the science lesson, okay." Jack clicked off the light and sat in silence and darkness for a few moments. He knew Max was pouting without looking at his face. They'd been friends and neighbors since kindergarten, and Max always turned red and puffed his cheeks when he felt slighted or abused. Now in the sixth grade, Jack felt too old to be playing straight man to Max's tantrums, but Jack needed an ally to search that house—to bolster his courage if nothing else—and both boys lived in the neighborhood.

Jack snapped the flashlight back to life. "Okay, so what do they call this thing—whatever you're talking about."

"They call it taxis—positive phototaxis when the bugs or whatever move toward the light—they can't even help it—no voluntary control. I guess even creepy-crawlies like the light." Max smiled, self-satisfied at his display of knowledge and ready to carry on with arrangements. Small insects gathered outside the tent, attracted by the light within.

♠

Later, after agreeing to sneak out of their respective houses at ten on Friday and meet in the tent, Jack and Max went their separate ways. Jack merely scrambled out of the tent and to his back door only twenty yards away. Before he slipped into his house, he looked across his next-door neighbor's backyard and toward the black mass that was the abandoned house. In the daylight, the place just looked sad—peeling paint, loose, graying boards, even one window with a small crack where he had thrown a rock on a dare two weeks ago. Jack designed this adventure to cure his fear of the dark, a private shame no one but his mother knew as he always hid the nightlight in his dresser before friends were invited.

Besides, old houses always had rumors surrounding them, and if even one of the stories circulating at school rang true, they might find something very interesting inside. The old man had been anything from a gypsy to a retired mob enforcer to the kids at

school, and no one had touched the place after his death. Jack smiled a little before slipping inside.

♠

On Friday night, air swirled fallen leaves about them as they crawled from Jack's tent. After a brief review of the plan, the boys set off through darkened backyards, just enough of the child left in both of them to find thrill in each passing car—someone who might uncover their plot, but just enough adult to vaguely recognize the crime that they were about to commit. Jack carried a few simple tools, a screwdriver, pliers, and his old Swiss Army knife; Max held the map, and a flashlight smuggled in the cargo pocket of his pants. They had agreed to leave the flashlights behind for fear that any lights in the place might give them away, but Jack wasn't the only boy who harbored a secretive fear of the dark. The night was clear, and the light from the stars and almost full moon would easily shine though the windows of the house, providing just enough light to see.

They approached the house through the shadows, and Jack quietly gestured toward the back door and then pointed at himself. Max nodded and kneeled in the cold grass. Jack crept to the back door, rattled the handle and pushed, but the door wouldn't budge. He slipped back to the side where Max waited and shook his head.

Both boys then stalked toward the front of the house. Jack waited for a set of headlights to sway down Ninth Street, past the front of the house, before he darted out, wrapped the front knob in his hand, turned, and pushed. He reeled with surprise when the door gave, opening into the dark, dusty interior of the house, releasing an odor of dirt, moldy wood, and a faint hint of garbage that sat too long in the sun. His heart stopped momentarily, or it felt as though it had, because the inside of that place looked much darker than he had painted in his imagination. A new set of headlights in the distance forced him to shut the door quickly and scramble around the side where Max waited.

"The door is unlocked," he panted.

"What?"

"Unlocked, I got a peek inside. Really dark."

Max felt for the light in his pocket, harboring his own private fear of lightless places. "You want to stop?"

Jack's breath returned, and he said, "No. Not unless you do."

A moment passed. "No, I'm ready."

They waited for another clear moment, and one after the other hurried to the door and pushed their way inside, struggling against the subtle stench, passing a threshold into the maw of the house. Both stood with wide eyes, waiting for pupils to dilate and help them see anything. Slowly, bit by bit, each could make out snatches of wood flooring, old wallpaper with split and peeling seams, and the black rectangle doorways leading to other rooms. The house held more than enough opaque shadows, thick ink poured into corners, along walls and the floor where the faint sliver glow from the windows couldn't touch.

"Empty?" asked Max, pinching his glasses.

"Empty," said Jack, his voice collapsing on the floor.

The boys stood just inside the entryway, stairs leading up into darkness on their right, a large empty room on the left with a two connecting doorways. The house was small, and they knew the adventure would be over before either felt it had begun. Their faces held twin expressions of hollow disappointment; they'd arrived for the circus only to find muddy elephant tracks and litter swirling in an empty field.

"Look, maybe we should just leave," Max said.

The empty house strangely bolstered Jack's courage as though he had expected to find the old man sitting in the middle of the room, waiting for him. He stood next to Max and slowly swept the room in his vision. "No…I think I'm going to look around." Jack moved toward one of the doorways in the back of the main room. "Kitchen?"

"Yeah, I think so—the other room leads to the back door."

Jack padded softly across the open floor, peering quickly into the open room on the left, and then stepped into the kitchen. Max followed, nervously fingering the outside of his pocket in which he carried the contraband flashlight. He watched from the doorway to the kitchen as Jack moved across the chipped linoleum, a bright blue-white expanse in the dim moonlight. Then a sound,

something faint like the blowing of leaves in the yard, stirred around them, almost as if from the walls—or below the floor.

"Jack…did you hear…"

"Just the leaves, no sweat." Jack opened and slammed shut each cabinet door in the kitchen, finding nothing, not even a half-empty bottle of dish soap under the sink, a broken mug above the counter, or a few small cockroaches that scurried away when discovered. He moved to a door at the far end of the kitchen, opened it and gazed into the blackness below. The basement—Jack's stomach twisted, caught by a cold fist—too dark down there. He really heard the noise now, a small scrabbling sound like tiny feet on the concrete floor below along with whispers that walked on the back of his neck. No, he would not go in the basement—he slammed the door shut and the noise seemed to stop. Jack paused, listening, and then pushed his way past the plump boy and into the main room.

"Hey," Max protested.

"Your stupid friend—Ellis—he's full of shit. There isn't anything in this stupid house." His anxious frustration found a target in his friend. Jack's fear had dissipated with each empty cabinet, only to balloon again when he opened the door to the black basement.

"I'm not the only one—you believed him too." Max stood at the threshold to the kitchen wearing a chubby frown, the last vestige of childhood tantrum and protest.

"Yeah, well, I think he's full of shit now." Jack strode to the stairs, just inside the doorway. "Let's check up here," he said, taking two steps at a time, mocking courage but really seeking distance from that tiny noise, trying not to lose face in front of Max.

At the top of the stairs a small landing led to two small bedrooms and a bath. Jack fought involuntary shivers—shivers not born of the chilly night air—as he stepped into the bathroom. With not even a small window to spread starlight, the bathroom sat in near complete gloom. Jack stood just inside, felt the fear crawl from his stomach like something small with tiny scratching feet, and stepped away. His eyes caught the black shadows in the bathtub, multiplied by his own shadow blocking a bit of light from the

hallway, and those shadows seemed to move slightly as he stepped away.

"Anything?" Max pinched his glasses as he stood on the landing behind Jack.

Jack jumped slightly, and replied with forced coolness, "No, just an empty bathroom."

The floor creaked, protesting the trespass as the two boys crept into both rooms on the second floor of the house. They found nothing in either, save for a few dirty rags in the larger room. Well-positioned windows pulled in ample moonlight, chasing away all but the most stubborn shadows. Jack could see his own house out one of the windows, just over the roof of his neighbor's single story. He thought of his bed, the warm quilt his grandmother had made, and how tired and foolish he'd been to think this house held anything but dark and vacant space. He thought of the nightlight, too, and how this venture into the empty house did anything but cure his fear of the dark. Then he heard it again. A small, scratching, almost clawing sound, seemingly echoing from the walls around them. Jack looked at Max.

"The leaves, remember—you said the leaves." Max said.

Jack swallowed his fear, continuing his faux courage, but just feeling tired, cold, and scared. "Look, let's get out. There isn't a damn thing here. This old guy wasn't a bank robber, or a killer, or whatever-else-crap Ellis tried to feed us." The sound stopped as Jack spoke and now he hurried to fill the empty space. "I should have never listened to you," he said, moving toward the stairs.

"Screw you, Jack. I'm tired of you bossing me around." Max pushed past his friend, making the stairs first and rushing down. Jack, stunned for a moment, followed after Max. As he rounded the bottom of the stairs he saw Max standing in the kitchen doorway.

"You didn't check one place, Jack. Or were *you* scared?" Max vanished into the kitchen.

Jack closed his eyes, imagined Max in the dark cellar, and eventually followed into the kitchen. Upon entering the kitchen, he immediately saw the open door leading to the basement. A small light glowed from the doorway, seemed to bounce, and then grew still again. Other than the light click of the flashlight striking concrete, there was no sound.

Just Max playing a trick, Jack thought. *This place is empty—nothing here to worry about.* He wavered a moment before sighing and plunging through the basement door. His feet nearly slipped after the first few steps, but his sure hands caught the rail. Jack surveyed the room, catching sight of the discarded flashlight. Other than the light, the basement was empty—just a wide expanse of concrete. Not even a single spider web dotted the visible corners of the room.

Jack took a few cautious steps from the bottom step. "Max?" he called. "C'mon, buddy. Joke's over, okay?" The cold crunch of his sneakers on the grey floor answered him but nothing else. He bent over and picked up the flashlight, its dull yellow beam the only shield between Jack and total darkness.

"Really…come out, okay?" Jack poked the weak beam in all four corners of the room, forcing the shadows to retreat. After he had rounded the room once, the sound, the dry rustling scratch of dead leaves, swelled around him, echoing from each wall. The stale smell rose again, ebbing from the dark corners, squeezing from the oily darkness outside of the flashlight beam, almost as though the emptiness could taste Jack's fear. He glanced at the light; it had grown dim and flickered a few times. "Max," Jack whimpered, his voice nearly dying in his throat.

The flashlight sputtered out. Jack tapped it with the palm of his free hand. It gave one last lance of tepid light, and disappeared. He held his breath for a moment, alone in the dark basement of an abandoned house. The flashlight fell to the ground with a hollow clatter as the emptiness—the black *nothingness* devoured its second boy of the evening.

Aaron A. Polson
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

Aaron Polson is a high school English teacher who frequently argues about the definition of irony with his students. In his spare time, he can be found in his basement study, plugging away at some twisted tale. Most of Aaron's work falls in the darker side of the ledger, inspired by a persistent fear of the dark. Many of his stories take place in the fictional town of Springdale, Kansas, a strange place modeled after his own hometown of Clay Center. He currently resides in Lawrence, Kansas with his wife, two sons, and a tattooed rabbit. His short fiction has appeared in *Reflection's Edge*, *Necrotic Tissue*, *Harvest Hill* from Graveside Tales, and other publications. You can visit Aaron on the web at www.aaronpolson.com.

Call You Again

Benjamin Farthing

Architecture is a vicious, insensitive thing. The design of a house can provide for easy eavesdropping from room to room. Architecture can destroy any privacy one thinks that they may have. In fact, architecture can take one's business and thrust it into the face of another, whether or not the latter person is truly interested. Take, for example, the arrangement of my room, and my younger brother, Sam's room. I can hear just about any conversation that goes on in there, but for him to hear me I would practically have to yell. Something about the architecture of the house does that. I can't help but wonder how things would have gone differently if the architecture of my family's house was different. Perhaps, with different architecture, the horror that plagues me wouldn't exist. Or, at least, it would be plaguing someone else.

Like I said, anything that goes on in Sam's room, I can hear. Sometimes it is muffled, but I always hear it. Before last week, every evening Sam would listen to the Melissa Nite Spot, this pop radio show that always ended up being more talk than music. Melissa's voice would often carry through the walls, and I constantly asked Sam to turn the volume down. Sam would talk to Melissa. I know it sounds a little crazy, but it wasn't. Not then. Sam would laugh and tell her she was a fool, or perhaps that she

was cool. I couldn't quite tell, and either way, I wasn't too worried about it.

Melissa wasn't the only girl in Sam's life. Sam dated this pretty fifteen-year-old named Cynthia. They were one of those couples who turn heads in the hallways. Neither was stunningly attractive, but together they created this essence that said, "Look at us! We're in love and we love it!" When they hooked up last year, they were freshmen, I was a junior, and no one was surprised. The general reaction was that it was about time. Anyway, two weeks ago I was sitting in my room, trying to read and understand Poe's "The Raven", when I began to hear singing from Sam's room. Sam and Cynthia had gone in there about fifteen minutes before and I had assumed that it would be quiet for a while, if you know what I mean. So this song came on the radio "Call and Answer" by The Suits, and when the chorus started I could hear the young lovebirds singing along:

Today or tomorrow,
Whenever, wherever,
I will forever,
Call you again.

I laughed a little bit, marveling once again at the architecture in our home, and went back to reading about the talking bird. I stopped when the music cut off.

"You promise?" I heard my brother say.

"Of course." Cynthia responded. Promising, I assume, to answer if he called.

Cynthia did not make it home that night.

While driving home, a drunken old man crossed the median and hit her head on. Both drivers were alone, and both were dead when the next car pulled up, twenty minutes later.

Fate is brutal. Architecture is vicious and Fate is brutal.

Reporters loved the story. Nothing grabs the public's attention more than a respected elderly citizen and a high school beauty dying in the same night. In the same car crash no less. It was a town tragedy and everyone felt entitled to mourn. But they weren't. Only Sam was entitled to mourn. Fiendish newsmen wanted Sam's opinion on this break from the dull. I wouldn't let

them ask him for it. I inscribed this message in the grain of a few fist sized rocks and delivered them through the front windshield of any news van that pulled into our driveway.

Two nights after the accident, Sam turned on his radio again. Every night until I fell asleep I would hear the soft drone of Melissa's voice, and the deeper drone of Sam's voice. Sam's mourning confused me. The depression should have thrown off his habits and daily routines, but there he was, conversing with the local DJ. I only wish my lack of understanding had stopped here; then I would have no tale to tell.

The funeral was two days later. There were dozens of strangers, and the casket was closed. People spoke and people cried. Sam didn't, though. He sat through the ceremony with a sort of curious indifference on his face. At one point, one of the stranger's cell phones rang and the man we didn't know left the funeral he didn't really care about. Sam's gaze followed the man until the door to the chapel shut out the stranger. Sam leaned over to me and asked with real curiosity, the first real emotion he had shown for a week, "Who do you think that was?"

"The face behind the yellow tape, Sam." I put my arm around my baby brother. "An indifferent face in the crowd."

Sam stared at me for moment, puzzled. His expression turned to realization, and then to disappointment. "Not him. The person he was talking to." But as Sam spoke, the speaker at the pulpit stepped down and the choir began to sing.

Afterwards, at the dinner for family and close friends, Cynthia's mother came up to Sam.

"Thank you so much for coming," She spoke on the verge of tears. "This must be as hard for you as it is for us."

Sam's head tilted, as if he didn't quite understand what this woman was saying. "Did they find Cynthia's cell phone at the crash?"

Cynthia's mother's head twitched back just an inch, and she opened her mouth, but her tongue had forgotten how to form words.

I decided it was good time for me to step in. "Sam's been taking it pretty hard." With my arm wrapped around Sam's shoulder we made our way back to our table. "What was that about, Sam?"

Sam gave me one of his increasingly common looks of puzzlement and told me as if I were foolish for asking, "I wanted to know. She had it when she left our house. I wanted to know if she had it when they found her."

That night, last night, while I was trying to sleep, Sam turned off his radio and came into my room. He sat down at the foot of my bed and began to speak. "I talk to Cynthia."

The bright, lime numbers of my clock informed me that three minutes had gone by before I could think of anything to say. "I suppose that's okay. I'm sure that there are a lot of things you wish that you could have told her before…" I hesitated. Before what? Before the girl that you were in love with was crushed between the steering column and the front seat? "…before what happened."

Glowing green with the light of a Sony clock/radio, his eyes locked onto mine. "She talks to me." And then his eyes could no longer hold the force of the tears that had been pressing against them for so long. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed. I crawled over and put my arm around him. He continued to sob with his head in his hands and lonely trails of thick tears feeling their way down his forearms. The dissonance of his crying became eerily more rhythmic, and I soon realized he was singing through his tears.

"*Today or tomorrow, whenever, wherever, I will forever, call you again."*

He repeated this a few times, and then shortened it to: "*I will forever, call you again."*

He repeated this a few times, and then stood up. He walked back to his room singing. "*Call you again, call you again, call you again."*

I sat on my bed and heard the door to his room shut. His footsteps created the sound waves that easily reached my ears as he moved around his room. Soon I heard the soft voice of Melissa conversing, once again, with the deep, muffled voice of Sam. I decided that this was unhealthy. Sam needed to stop speaking with a DJ that couldn't hear him and he needed to talk about his problem with someone who could help. I walked to the door of Sam's room, knocked, opened it, and stuck my head inside. "Sam? Could you turn your radio off?" I glanced at the only radio that Sam kept in his room.

The radio was not on. The female voice that I had been hearing was not coming from the radio. The little red light that professed power was unlit. Sam was sitting across the room on his bed. There was no possible way that he could have cut off the radio and then gotten to his bed quickly enough for me not to notice. It was then that I noticed that Sam was clutching his cell phone in his right hand. He held it just to the right of his chin, as if he had dropped it from his ear when I opened the door. His eyes were those of child caught doing something he knew was wrong. I didn't know what to do; I didn't know what to say. I walked away from Sam's room and returned to my bed.

That was last night. Tonight I sit here on my bed, scribbling furiously into a notebook. Again, Sam's voice, and the voice of a female are drifting into my room. A few hours ago I picked up Sam's cell phone and tried to check the record of calls. The only incoming or outgoing calls were to or from Cynthia. Earlier today I looked up hallucinations in a few psychology books. Some say to approach the problem directly; others say to do it with caution. But, I had no real reason to do that. I'm no shrink. I was just postponing any real action. Because I am afraid. Sam is not talking to Melissa. Sam is talking to Cynthia. No. Sam *thinks* that he is talking to Cynthia. But if it is only in his mind, who does that female voice belong to? Sam isn't close to any female that I can think of. Except for Cynthia. I know it sounds crazy, but here's what I think happened. I think Sam called Cynthia and she answered. She was bound by her promise, and she answered. Maybe all this happened in Sam's mind, but that makes it real enough for him.

Maybe I will go to the site of the accident and look for Cynthia's cell phone. Maybe if I find it, I can prove that nothing surreal is happening. Prove it to Sam and prove it to me. After that, I don't know what I'll do.

Architecture is vicious and Fate is brutal.

Lord, help me; I do not know what to do.

Benjamin Farthing
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

Benjamin Farthing studies English at the College of William and Mary, where most of the buildings are haunted. During the right season he gives ghost tours to freshman and tourists. The story "Call You Again" leapt into his head all at once. One moment he had nothing, the next he knew every detail of character and plot. Benjamin is currently working on a novel about political intrigue in a world of animals called "The Talon's Bane."

Lime Green Closet

K.V. Taylor

"Should I carry you over the… ah…?"

"Threshold?"

"Yeah, that."

Alice rolled her eyes and shook out the umbrella. "You'll hurt yourself."

Jonathan just grinned, dangling the keys in front of her. "Then would you like to do the honors and let us into our very first house?"

She swiped them out of his hand and stuck her tongue out. "Little House on the Wrong Side of the Tracks?"

He looked over his shoulder, toward the Rapid Transit tracks half a block away. "Could be worse."

"Could be all the way in the ghetto?" She smirked and slipped the key into the lock. In spite of all her talk, there was a fluttering low in her belly she couldn't deny. Her first feeling of respectable middle class propriety.

She pushed the door open and their new living room, naked and beautiful, unfolded before her eyes. The old wooden floors had been perfectly restored, chipped underneath and lacquered on top; the leaden glass windows were pristine and shining with new rain; the walls were a delicious shade of eggshell white…

When they'd seen it last, there had been seventies shag carpet and dirty lime green paint.

"Oh god, look at this," he sighed behind her.

She stepped inside, into *her new house*, and sighed too. Weeks of trying not to expect too much, hoping the job would get done while they were busy packing and moving from hundreds of miles away…

Well, no point in getting *too* excited yet. She handed off the umbrella and started toward the dining room, planning to make her way to the restored kitchen before allowing herself the small squeal of joy rising up in her throat.

A faint, "Oh!" from Jonathan halted her progress, though. She turned back to see him looking into the coat closet near the stairs, grinning like an idiot.

She moved to his side and saw why immediately. The massive closet had obviously been forgotten in all the remodeling—its walls were still that putrid glowing green from before, its floors stripped of the awful carpet, but without lacquer. An old wooden cane—definitely not theirs—was the only object still inside.

"That's just creepy," she said.

Jonny laughed. "Oh, come on. Probably belonged to the old doc." He waggled his eyebrows.

"You'd think they would've cleaned *all* his things out after we bought it. Or, you know, actually remodel the whole place." Like they'd paid them to.

He wasn't bothered. "Maybe there's treasure in the floorboards too."

She rolled her eyes once more. "Don't even think about tearing them up to find out."

He dropped her umbrella inside and closed the door behind, then followed her on her tour.

♠

A few hours later, the appliances arrived. And so Alice found herself on her knees trying to figure out how the hell to hook the dryer up while Jonathan was somewhere behind the washer.

"It's not a *bad* neighborhood. I mean, the guy was a doctor at University Hospital. If it was bad, he definitely had the money to move out."

Alice somehow refrained from rolling her eyes this time, but only because he wouldn't have seen it anyhow.

The basement hadn't been refurbished—they'd only had so much money to work with. It was dark and mildew-smelling, all chipped cement and crumbling brick and dodgy-looking cubby-holes. There was half a skinny metal table-thing that looked like it had escaped an operating room in the far corner, and the floor was covered in some kind of unclassifiable basement residue. Kneeling on it made her impatient.

"There was a shooting not ten blocks away a few months back, they busted a meth lab once, and some girl disappeared off this very street not long ago. That's just the recent stuff." Yes, she had gone a little wild on the researching of the neighborhood. But honestly, this was their *home*.

"You're not going to be paranoid, are you?"

"No." Well, maybe she was. But he'd known what he was getting when he'd married her. "The house is too amazing for me to care."

And it was. It *really* was, after the refurbishing. It was everything she'd ever wanted. But that didn't mean she couldn't complain a little when she was dusty and sweaty and tired.

He just laughed and stood up. "Done with mine. What's taking you so long?"

This time she rolled her eyes. The tube didn't fit in the… hole or something. She couldn't quite figure it out, and he really *could* come over here and help instead of wandering around uselessly while she struggled in the wine-cellar/laundry room on her own—

"Hey! Check this out!"

She stood, too happy to have an excuse to be annoyed at the interruption. He waved at her from the little entryway, then led her into another small side room—the one he called the larder and claimed must've been filled with preserves once upon a time.

Walking through the arch-entryway gave her a weird feeling. Like there were cobwebs clinging to her hair and face. She waved her hand as if to brush them away, even though she knew they weren't really there.

Jonathan pointed to the top shelf.

Her eyes followed his finger. Dusty glasses looked back down at her, ancient mason jars with corroded lids. "Wow. Those might be worth something."

He was already exploring the small room more thoroughly, poking at shelves and peering closely into the dark recesses in the walls.

Alice hoped he wouldn't find anything else, though. The cane, the jars, and the table were eerie enough as relics of the past resident. Even if the realtor *swore* the doctor hadn't died in the house, it was just odd. He was dead, and these had been part of his life. And…

Yep. Disturbing.

"Oh, wicked!"

She took a deep breath and turned. He held up a faded green-and-yellow box. "Shotgun shells."

She looked around for where they might've come from.

"Found them in this little niche," he explained, poking his arm into a formerly unseen cubbyhole behind a shelf.

Her spine suddenly tingled a little; the tiny grey room seemed a little *too* tiny. Not to mention *underground*. "They were stashed away? Like, hidden?"

"Bet he kept all his money under his mattress, too. Hey, the Depression was rough." He grinned, completely oblivious as usual.

She suppressed a shiver and turned away. If she showed him she was creeped out, he'd have to try and make it better and talk it to death. And… she just wanted to go upstairs. "Just leave them be and come fix the dryer."

♠

When it stopped raining, they rescued the futon and TV from the truck, then went for burritos. And now they had a feast in front of them. In spite of the fact that Alice was starving, she waited for Jonny to pour the pathetic chardonnay they'd snagged in the corner shop.

"To our house," he said, holding his plastic cup aloft.

She smiled and knocked her own against it, then had a drink. If she didn't know him (and oh, she did) she would've

thought he was completely in earnest with this little toast. He had this look to him, this fresh little boy face that made him seem so genuine about everything. It was just the little flash in his eyes that said he was being a shit, the way the dimple in his left cheek betrayed him.

Good man. Lucky woman. New house. Our *house.* All these thoughts at once, all with that little sip of cheap wine. She swallowed them all and didn't mind showing how happy she was, the flutter in her stomach, this time. It had been a long day. And tomorrow would be longer, when the moving truck caught up with them.

If she'd been annoyed by the little mementos left in the un-renovated spaces in her house, or by the unpainted front closet, she wasn't anymore. They'd restored everything so beautifully, from the woodwork to the Tiffany shade on the chandelier in the dining room, that she couldn't care at all. She could see its warm soft glow in the next room now, picnicking on the floor against the futon, the TV buzzing away quietly, and these burritos were *amazing*—

A loud and sudden bang, like something falling from a great height, made her jump. Jonathan fumbled his burrito and it landed open-end-down (thankfully on the foil wrapper he'd spread) on the floor.

Her heart leapt into her throat. "What was that?"

It had been inside the house, whatever it was. So, not some bad neighborhood activity. Definitely not.

He gave his burrito a dirty look, but recovered far more gracefully than she. "Dunno. Not much that could fall in here yet."

Heart still lodged firmly in throat, thrumming away most uncomfortably, she watched him stand and start toward the staircase—where she thought the sound had been coming from as well. But he slid to a premature stop on his stocking feet and opened the coat closet instead. "I'll be damned," he said. Then he leaned over and his top half disappeared inside.

She crawled sideways a little to get a better vantage, but he came out with his prize—another of the green-and-yellow boxes like he'd found downstairs—and waved it at her. It rattled ominously. "Crazy old bastard had them everywhere."

Alice suddenly felt cold sitting on the floor. Looking at an old dusty box of shotgun shells. Her eyes darted into the closet—the cane still rested there, but… "Where's my umbrella?"

Jonathan turned around, eyed the space for a minute, then announced, "No idea. You take it to the car?"

"No." Definitely chilly. Of course, the house was drafty. She'd get used to it eventually, and learn to wear sweaters like normal people did in October in Cleveland, no doubt.

"Hm. Must have closet gremlins." He went up on his toes to deposit the box on the shelf above their coats, and closed the door behind him. "That's good. It'll make the place seem less lonely when you're at work."

But she hadn't taken it. Really. He must've and just forgotten, then. That would be like him—her mother said Jonny wouldn't know his ass from his head without her, and that was fairly accurate. (Even if she didn't like her mother to say it. That was *her* job.)

"Come here and sit with me," she said. He felt far away, over there on the other side of the mostly-bare room.

He smiled, obviously pleased that his company was so sought-after, and returned to his burrito.

♠

Something like thumping on the stairs woke Alice in the night. It was raining again, heavy drops against the window above the futon. The first floor was pitch black.

She couldn't move. Her blood was rushing in her ears. Ever since she was a kid, if she woke in the middle of the night scared, she was frozen. Perhaps some unnamed thing would get her if she tried. She'd never thought it through. She didn't want to.

She tried for a deep breath. It might've been a dream, just the sound of thunder converted by her half-asleep brain into something menacing. New house. Weird neighborhood.

"Jonny?" she managed. It sounded jarringly loud in the silent house, bouncing off the floors and walls.

"Mmm?" The sound was muffled, coming from under his arm. It might've been a word, but maybe not.

Either way, it made her feel like she could move again—broke the weird dream spell. She felt slightly sick to her stomach in the aftermath. "Did you hear anything?"

He pushed himself upward and looked at her, bleary-eyed in the dark. "No. You okay, honey?"

"Just a dream," she said, more to herself than him.

He rolled out of bed immediately; shoved his hand down the back of his shorts and scratched manfully at his ass while he wandered in the direction of the dining room. "Over here?"

She felt *so* stupid. He'd been sound asleep, and now he was up wandering around a cold living room in his underwear because she'd had a dream. God. "It's fine. Come back to bed."

He made a round, though, into the kitchen, then through the other side and back into the living room, where he stopped to look up the stairs. "Up there?"

"If I really thought there was something, I'd be up looking with you."

He waved her off. And opened the closet.

She held her breath.

He shrugged and closed it, then padded back to the futon and slipped into the covers again. He was cold—she could feel it already. "Wake me up if you hear it again. Might be the gremlins"

She slipped closer and he put an arm around her. She tried to make up for her stupidity by supplying extra body warmth for him, and slipped a leg between his to help. He made a "mmm" sound that let her know he was grateful, squeezed her a little tighter.

It made her feel slightly better. "Just the strange house. And camping in the living room."

"We'll have a real bed tomorrow," he mumbled and kissed her forehead.

He was asleep again in seconds. It took her a little longer.

♠

Alice hadn't been back to the basement since they'd hooked up the washer and dryer three days ago. She thought she might've been blowing the creepiness of it out of proportion in her mind. But as she descended the stairs with her laundry basket, reached up and pulled the little string to light the naked bulb on the ceiling…

Nope. Grey, oppressive, wet, dark—the light barely made a dirty yellow puddle, and it didn't extend far past the foot of the stairs.

She sighed and trudged onward, past the abandoned half-table in the corner, past the larder-with-the-mason-jars, refusing to look at them. That cobwebby feeling was there again, too. Maybe she should consider asking Jonathan to switch chores with her. She could do double dish duty and *he* could do the laundry—

Bang!

Alice dropped the basket on the washer, something unpleasant rising in the back of her throat, and sprinted for the stairs. That sound had been *right* over her head, and the last time she'd checked Jonathan had been moving the TV across the living room. That could *not* be good—not for the appliance or the husband.

She passed through the kitchen in a blur, expecting to find Jonny buried under furniture or something awful. But when she swung around the corner into the living room, he was just coming down the stairs.

"Oh god, I thought you'd fallen or something." He sighed in relief.

"I thought you broke the TV."

"God forbid." Then he paused and looked around. "What was it?"

She shook her head and went into the kitchen to investigate. He went the other way. Her shiny new granite countertops were untouched, the chandelier in the other room was fine—

"Oh shit."

Not good. Normally when Jonathan said something like that, he was laughing. This sounded… strained.

The need-to-puke feeling came back, but Alice made herself go into the living room, step up behind her slack-jawed husband staring into the lime green coat closet—and her jaw dropped too.

There was the cane, of course. They'd decided not to move it since it was just a little too creepy. But now there was also a freakishly familiar half of a slim table—like a metal gurney or something. In the closet.

"I just walked past that downstairs." It really had been there. She was sure of it.

He looked at her, awfully wide-eyed. "You didn't put this here?"

She blinked. "No."

"*I* didn't put it there."

More blinking. "I…"

He left the door hanging open and headed for the basement. She followed him halfway down—far enough to see that the metal table half she'd been sure was still there was, in fact, still there.

He scratched his head, staring at it. "What the hell?"

She shivered. "It," she fumbled around in her brain for an explanation, "must've been behind your coat."

He turned his back on the table to look up at her. "What about before the coat was there? That thing was empty except the cane."

"Maybe one of the movers?" she suggested. But it sounded pretty hollow. And not just because it bounced off the basement walls in that unnerving way, either.

"Must be the other half of this one." He looked over his shoulder one last time, then back at her. "Guess we should bring that down here, huh? Could use it for laundry."

"I don't think so," she snapped. She hadn't meant to, but god, she felt like she could crawl out of her skin.

He refrained from anymore gremlin jokes and just smiled at her in that unbearably sweet way he always did when she was being crazy. Bless him. "Oh well, it's a good out of the way place for stuff. Makes sense if it was a mover."

She tried to smile back, but knew it was weak. Silly of her, he was absolutely right. No reason to freak out. *Geez, drama queen.*

"Let's take a break and crack open that Malbec," he suggested suddenly.

That made her smile a little more real, at least. "You're wonderful."

He looked very proud of himself as he escorted her upstairs to the kitchen. "I knew that'd do it."

♠

Alice planned to be calm and sensible when she opened the closet door the next morning. She just needed to get her coat and then she could be off to her first day at her first firm.

The problem was that her umbrella was leaning next to the cane. And her coat was gone.

Jonathan popped around the corner at the sound of her strangled cry, his hair sticking up in every direction and part of the *Plain Dealer* still in hand. "Honey?"

It was too early for rationality, and her stomach was already a mess from the new job jitters. She just pointed into the closet in silence until he came and saw for himself.

"Where'd you find it?" he asked.

"I didn't. It's just *there*."

"Well you must have because…" but he trailed off and caught her eye there.

"And my coat is gone." Her throat felt extremely tight, but she managed to squeeze it out anyhow.

He chewed at the inside of his cheek and peered into the closet suspiciously.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked. Even though she knew it was useless.

It wasn't a prank, and there was nobody to pull one anyhow. So what the *hell* was going on?

He squared his shoulders, stepped into the closet, and pulled his own coat off the hanger. "Take mine for now. And… maybe leave the umbrella in the car?"

She did, because she was already running late. And she left Jonathan right there, staring at the open closet, scratching his head with the business section.

♠

By the time she pulled the truck into the driveway and hopped out, she'd almost forgotten about it all. First days were unnerving like that.

She slipped through the back door and called, "Jonny?"

"In here."

His voice wasn't right. He wasn't smiling—she knew it before she saw him. And there he was, sitting on the futon in his

Penn State pajama pants and wife beater, like he had been when she'd left. Staring at the closet.

"Are you sick?" she asked, even though she knew he wasn't. But he was a little bit pale, or a little bit drawn, or a little bit something that wasn't very Jonathan. And that feeling in her stomach started up again, the loud sound in her ears that meant her blood was rushing.

He looked up at her, shook his head. His laptop was on the futon next to him, but it was closed and the *Plain Dealer* was on top of it. He clearly hadn't gotten much work done today.

She dropped his coat on the arm and sat, followed his gaze as it returned to the closet door. And something on the floor next to it—a jar? With something brown in it?

"What…?"

He licked his lips, glanced at her, then back toward the door. "There was this shattering sound around one o'clock. And I opened the door, and that was inside. And another one that was broken."

One of the old mason jars, obviously. She was positive, absolutely *positive* there hadn't been any of those in there. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. She just felt queasy.

"And it was broken, like… the edges had this brown stuff on it. And it's flaky. Old, you know? Not like paint."

Blood. Looking at it now, even at this distance, she recognized it. She closed her eyes against the growing dizziness. "What the fuck?"

"I don't know. So I put the colander in there after I took the glass out—"

Her eyes snapped open. "Why the colander?"

"I just made mac and cheese. It was the first thing I thought of."

She would've laughed if she could've. But when Jonathan wasn't laughing it was perfectly clear that nothing was funny. He just looked lost, bewildered. Not right.

"And it was gone the next time I heard that thumping sound."

"Oh."

"So… I hope you didn't want pasta for dinner."

She laughed that time, but it sounded a little bit hysterical.

♠

"Things disappear and re-appear, but they're always things that belong here, in this house," he said, then chewed on the inside of his cheek. The dimple appeared, but it seemed more of an ominous thing this time.

She shook her head. "Should we call the police?"

"And tell them our closet eats things and spits other things back out?"

"Sometimes the same things," she said.

He furrowed his brow. "Maybe always the same things."

"I did *not* put that table in there, and I definitely didn't stash those nasty jars."

"No. Neither of *us* did. But someone put them in there. Maybe before."

She blinked again. She felt like she was doing an extraordinary amount of blinking tonight. It was the most articulate she could get, at this point.

♠

He pushed his potatoes around his plate some more. She wanted to tell him to stop it—to eat, to stop worrying—but in a selfish way. It was very hard for her to be cheerful when Jonny wasn't. Always had been.

The sound of voices from next door drifted through the window. Music playing on the porch. Maybe they were celebrating the fact that it wasn't raining, for once.

Jonathan stood up. "I'm going to go ask them about the old guy."

She froze. "Why?"

"I don't know."

But he did. And so did she. Because if *they* hadn't put those things in the closet…

No. They were just being stupid. They'd missed the jars—they were probably up there when they'd moved in, on the back of the shelf with the shells, and it was all rickety and dropped things

sometimes. Jonathan had *clearly* been mistaken about the pasta strainer, and the table had definitely been put there by the movers.

But Jonny was out the door already. So she followed him onto the front porch in her bare feet and waved to the neighbors—two teenage kids—when they looked her way.

"—Alice and Jonathan Sinclair," he was telling them. Somehow he was managing his usual smile and nod. But it still sounded forced to her.

Poor Jonny. He wasn't meant to be scared. Didn't know what to do with it. It almost broke her heart to see him having to force a smile.

The kids introduced themselves as the Murphys.

"You know the guy who lived here before?"

The boy shook his head. "Nah, he was real quiet. Ah, our sister used to," a brief pause there before he finished with, "talk to him sometimes."

Jonathan just nodded. "Was he weird or anything? We keep finding the strangest stuff."

To say the least.

The girl shook her head, cracked her gum. "Always seemed real normal. Lisa said he was nice."

The boy chewed his lip a little.

Jonathan made small talk until they were both smiling at him, and Alice pretended to watch the street, listening to the rumble of the Rapid train down the block.

When he came back to their porch he immediately nodded her inside. He went straight to the futon and flipped through the paper for a moment, then handed it to her. "I didn't even realize."

Local Woman Still Missing: Lisa Murphy of 111th Street has been gone for a month now, but her family won't give up…

A picture of a pretty young woman with a brilliant smile. Long dark hair over her shoulder, a cross necklace flashing brightly at her collar bone.

Oh god. Those poor, poor kids. Their sister. Jesus, she could've at least *told* them she was running off.

Assuming she really *had*.

Jesus. Could *nothing* in this place be comfortable? First a closet that coughed up random artifacts to freak them out, and now their neighbors were the missing woman family. Which was *such* a

bitchy thing to think, and she definitely didn't mean it that way, but…

A cushioned thunk in the closet, followed by a metallic rattle.

She felt a sudden and violent urge to puke up what little dinner she'd managed to swallow. She couldn't go look. But Jonathan screwed up his face, squared his shoulders, and went straight for the door. She heard it creak open before she turned…

His face was pale, staring into the ghastly green darkness.

She forced herself to follow him.

"No," he snapped.

She wasn't sure she'd ever heard him snap before. It stopped her in her tracks.

Jonathan looked at her, shook his head, a tight, unnatural movement. "Don't look."

The room almost started to spin, but she *made* herself calm down. Deep breath. It couldn't be *that* bad. Especially not if it had to come from the house. The house was okay—a few little creepy things, but nothing too bad. Even the blood on the jars might not have been blood. "What is it?"

He hesitated. "Your coat. And… some other stuff."

A flash of anger tore a hole in the fear that had descended over her, made her stand there frozen. This was *ridiculous,* damn it all! She moved to his side, looked around him. The cane. Her coat on the floor. And some shiny things next to it and on top of it, scattered around. Metal things.

Medical things. A scalpel and some weird scissors. A few other things she didn't know names for, all small and sharp. Blades liberally slathered with flaking brown crust.

Jesus. "What is it…?"

He closed the door without another word, his lips pressed together hard, the muscle in his jaw working. "It doesn't mean anything. He was a doctor. Probably had lots of that stuff around." He didn't even try to force cheerfulness. Or explain why they'd be dirty.

He was certainly right, though, a voice in her head said. She was being dramatic. So it was a little blood. So weird things appeared in the closet. So what? There was an easy explanation—a hidden room, *something.*

He put his arms around her and pulled her close. Which helped more than a little. "Let's just clean up the table and camp on the couch?"

She nodded against his chest. "Yeah. I'll get the alarm clock."

He didn't need to tell her he was going to pull an all night vigil. And she didn't need to tell him she was staying with him.

♠

The thump woke her up—this time she was sure she'd heard it. It had been a multi-faceted thump. Like the sound of someone falling down a few stairs.

She opened her eyes, saw the TV and the late, late show. Jonny's hand on her hair, her head in his lap. Her eyelashes fluttered a few times, rid themselves of sticky sleep, but her blood stayed cold and sluggish. "That sounded loud," she said.

"It sounded bad," he replied. He shifted, and she sat up to let him go.

But this time she followed him. She didn't know how, but she did. She couldn't even reach out for him, touch him, try to reassure herself.

The smell was awful. A smell like a garbage dump on a hot day, like a deer on the side of the road that had been there too long. She felt the acid rising in the back of her throat, knew that it was worse than ever this time, but followed just the same. Lurching by the end, when the smell was so strong she thought it would knock her over, made her breathe through her shirt.

Jonathan made a horrible sound when he opened the door, something between a sick groan and a choking gasp, staggered backward a little.

The cane was there, of course. It always was.

And a form huddled in the back, distinctly human. Knees drawn up to the chest, arms down and out. Pale and wasted, long dark slashes up the inside of the forearms.

The door swung open wider, let in more light. Alice reeled when she saw the face—her knees collapsed under her and she hit the floor.

Mouth open, lips gone, teeth perfect and white. Hollow eye sockets, wisps of hair clinging to nothing here and there. Bone poking through rot.

Matted hair, long and dark.

The flash of a cross necklace.

K.V. Taylor
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

K.V. Taylor is an avid reader and writer of urban fantasy and dark speculative fiction, even though the only degree she holds in is in the history of art. (Or, possibly, *because* the only degree she holds is in the history of art.) Originally from the Appalachian foothills of West Virginia—a great place to get dark spec fic ideas, if anyone's interested—she currently lives in the D.C. Metro Area with her husband and mutant cat. In her spare time she enjoys comic books, Himalayan Buddhist art, loud music, Arthurian studies, her Epiphone, and Black Bush. Her work can be found in the Morrígan Books anthology, *Voices*, Graveside Tales' *Harvest Hill*, and at her website, kvtaylor.com.

Lime Green Closet is her first story based partially in reality. She and her friends occupied a newly renovated house in Cleveland while at school, and yes, it came equipped with a hideously green closet containing a cane of dubious origin. As with most things, her mind came up with the creepiest of all possibilities to explain said closet ten years later, and this story was born.

Wall Of Dreamings

Skadi meic Beorh

I was never diagnosed. Or at least I was never told what mental illness I had. I didn't care. I knew I wasn't insane. I knew the wall in my room was a door. The wall in my room at home; the wall in my room at Danvers. Both were doors, and I went through them often. And I brought back things. That was the only proof I had that I had left and gone somewhere. That each week I had three or four, and sometimes five, objects sitting around my room at home, and then at the hospital. The orderlies and nurses were frightened of them. I saw the fear in their eyes, because they knew I hadn't made the objects. They knew I didn't have the materials or the tools to make them. And even if I did, how could I make them talk?

Once I brought back a *chacmool*. A real one. A little woman with butterfly wings. She would stand quietly all day and night next to my bed, but sometimes, when the nurses would come in to check on me, the *chacmool* would speak to them.

"How are you doing today?" she would say. But she wouldn't move. At least not in the beginning. One time two big orderlies tried to lift her, to take her away, but they couldn't budge her. She wasn't all that heavy. I moved her around whenever I felt like it. After all, I was the one who brought her back from the other land. I could lift her very easily.

They stopped asking me where the *chacmool* came from after a while. When she talked, they all thought at first that I was throwing my voice, and they chided me for that, and threatened to have me put into a padded cell if I continued frightening everyone. Even if I had been throwing my voice, which I wasn't, normal people would have found that entertaining, I think. But insane asylums are not normal places, and people who work in them are not normal people. Ever.

One night I asked the *chacmool* if she wanted to go home, and she said yes, and so I sat in my chair in front of the wall until it became a door and then I picked her up and walked through it back to the jungle where I found her. But I found something else that I liked, and so I brought it back with me.

I was put in a padded cell for having what I brought back. I guess it was the only thing they knew to do. The punishment didn't fit the crime. Who ever heard of being cloistered away for having a leg bone? I guess they might have thought I had killed somebody and then brought the bone back to my room. But how could they have thought such a thing? Whenever I left my room in the day I was always guarded, and was never allowed off the asylum grounds. Maybe they thought I had snuck out at night. And in a way, I had.

I was in the padded cell for three weeks, until one of the doctors came and told me they had run tests on the leg bone, and discovered it belonged to a nonhuman. He didn't tell me what kind of nonhuman. I asked for my bone back, but they said no, and escorted me back to my bedroom. That night I left again, and what I brought back that time made them release me—clean bill of health.

Will I tell you?

No. I think you know.

Skadi meic Beorh
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

Skadi meic Beorh is a writer/editor focusing primarily on speculative fiction. He serves as Contributing Editor for the 'weird tales' magazine *The Willows*, and as staff writer for the magazine *Twoday*. His stories and poetry are regularly published in print journals and anthologies. His satirical fantasy novel of piracy, *To Be Saved From Witches,* will be published by WildSide Press in October of 2009. Much more about this author can be found at http://skadimeicbeorh.wordpress.com/

The Door

J.R.Cain

Cancer.

The end of all things. The test results were in a large white envelope, displayed on the mantle above the fireplace—Mike's paper tombstone. His mother's china dolls sat by it, lined up either side. A bride in a yellowed lace dress stared at it with painted eyes.

"No escaping this one, Mikey," Uncle Albert said, appearing alongside the television set. Dressed in Mike's pyjamas, a blue and white chequered dressing gown and floppy slippers, he'd been manifesting here and there for the past month. He wasn't a particularly popular uncle with Mike. In fact, he wasn't a particularly live uncle either. He was the bastard relative from Mike's youth, dead twenty years, who'd taken delight in twisting young Mikey's ear with his rib-bone fingers whenever he'd had opportunity.

Mike tried to project a look that could have made milk curdle into yoghurt and slither away with the spoon.

Uncle Albert didn't notice. Lost in his own world, he rubbed his hand across his chin, making a rasping sound on the stubble, and began humming Old Angzine.

Mike lifted his can in salute to the envelope and sipped his beer; it was warm and thick as Mylanta, with about as much taste as the slime on the underside of a slug. Mike reached into the crack

down the side of the lounge and retrieved a packet of pills. He popped three or four from the plastic and chewed them dry.

"It's 10:00 in the morning. You're still in your pyjamas," said Uncle Albert looking around the room like he'd lost his dentures. His eyes were watery with thin lines of crimson beneath them where the skin drooped.

"It's 10:00 am and *you're* still in my pyjamas. What of it?" Mike went for the phone on the coffee table by his side. One corduroy slipper was on his left foot—it flopped as he walked.

"You should eat something. Keep your strength up."

Mike put up one hand as if to ward away his Uncle's advice. He spoke on the phone with his supervisor.

"Screw you," Mike said with his voice rising in pitch like a possum that had just had a fish hook snare his nuts. "You know where to shove your deadline? . . . I won't be coming in."

Mike slammed down the receiver and bashed it against the phone three times; the phone dinged when struck. He sat on the floor, pulled up his legs and hugged his knees to his chest.

"That didn't go well." Uncle Albert hitched up his pants, vanished and reappeared behind Mike. He smelled like a broom closet: sour like mothballs. "You could get better with treatment." Uncle Albert caressed Mike's ear, perhaps tempted to give it a tweak? His touch was cold, his fingertips course.

Mike rocked on his bum holding his legs. "How can you fight when your bones have cancer? All I have are my pills; they help me forget. I don't want to go on." He turned to Uncle Albert. "I'm accepting of the end."

Uncle Albert made a slurping noise and his cheeks pulled in. It reminded Mike of a freak show rubber man trying to suck down his face.

Mike took a deep, angry breath, picked up the phone and stabbed in another number. He phoned his specialist and cancelled his future appointments.

"So much undone, Mikey," said Uncle Albert in one of his lecturing tones. "Eat something. You'll feel better for it." He seemed to be gliding backwards across the carpet in the direction of the kitchen.

Mike was impressed the old bastard could slide without moving his legs.

"You have to want to live, Mikey. If you don't find yourself, you'll never return."

Mike told him to get lost.

Uncle Albert "tut-tutted" and shook his head. "Never married. No kids. At least I had Agnes," he continued. "It's sad. You only had one woman in your life and that was your mother. She's dead, you know. Remember that. You have to move on."

Yes, Mother *was* dead. Mike was alone.

Mike ripped the phone cord from out of the wall.

He couldn't afford to pay the damned bill anyway.

♠

Mike lay in bed for the best part of a week. Chip packets and empty beer cans had somehow gathered about the bedroom like a congregation of rubbish awaiting his end. Mike moved the television in from the lounge room and sat it on the dresser where it played day and night. Deodorant cans and bottles of aftershave had been swept away, along with a picture of Mike's mother that watched from off the floor.

Uncle Albert popped in every now and then. Mostly, he berated Mike for the state of the house, or complained that the milk had gone sour or there were no biscuits for his tea. By Friday, Uncle Albert was angry and said he'd given up on trying to get Mikey active.

"You have to want to get better, Mikey," Uncle Albert said. "You have to want to come back. See a doctor. Eat something healthy for God's sake!" Uncle Albert waved his arms about frantically as he spoke and he had this pained expression on his face as if his dressing gown sleaves contained a bunch of angry, stinging bees.

Uncle Albert stormed into the hallway and disappeared.

Uncle Albert kept his distance for a while after that. Mike could hear him muttering as he wandered through the house.

Mike's life fell into a routine. He watched television until his eyes were watery, and exhaustion pummelled him into sleep each night. It was a sort of death, really. Mike was getting ready. One day he'd sleep forever and never wake up.

Uncle Albert wandered out of the closet. He wore a dilapidated straw hat, white Bermuda shorts and one of those gaudy Hawaiian shirts Mike hated so much, the ones his mother always gave him for birthdays as they "brought out the colours of his eyes." He held a twisted coat hanger and turned it around in his hands, examining it with all the excitement of a collector who'd discovered a wire Picasso in his drawer.

"Go away." Mike changed the TV channel, stabbing at the buttons of the remote. "I want to be alone."

Mike grimaced and clutched his side. He tipped a couple of white pills from a plastic and chewed them down.

"They help?" asked Uncle Albert.

Mike flipped him the bird.

"I'm leaving," said Uncle Albert. "I've better things to do than wait for death with you."

Mikey swore at him.

Uncle Albert looked offended. "Life is what you make it, Mikey. Death is too. I'm leaving to find out what what's in store for me. Find Agnes. Take her on a holiday."

Mike saw his reflection in the darkened window: a ghoul in striped pyjamas with black patches for eyes. His shirt was open and the contours of his ribs were highlighted with shadow.

Mike threw the remote. It passed right through Uncle Albert's neck and split apart as it hit the wall. "Go. I don't care."

Uncle Albert waved and slipped backwards through the closet door.

"All I can do is wait," Mike said.

Wait and watch TV.

Wait until that breath that was his last.

Mike sniffed each armpit. He noticed his mother's photograph on the floor. The glass in the frame had cracked. Mum was smiling. A white sport sock covered one eye.

Mike headed for the shower.

♠

Mike tugged away the last rotten plank barring shut the door at the back of the cellar. The nails gave way, ripped out of the

wall with a screech. He fell back on his arse with an undignified grunt. The plank clattered away into shadow.

Upstairs, the floorboards creaked as if someone were in the kitchen. Mike wondered if it was Uncle Albert, back again. He listened, then shook his head and went back to work.

He'd found the door yesterday while cleaning out the cellar, hidden beneath the cellar stairs, sealed shut with aged fence planks. It was concealed behind a curtain of green that stunk of damp, behind a stack of mouldering cardboard boxes, newspapers and assorted junk.

Mike had never seen the curtain or the door before – but he was noticing things since Albert had left. It was as if he were looking at the world with new eyes. Mike wanted to discover what was behind the door. Learn one last secret before he died. Besides, keeping busy kept his mind off the pain.

Mike took hold of the curtain. He ripped it away, and it fell to the floor, birthing fingers of dust, fine like the scales from butterfly wings.

The door was painted green. Cracked, old paint, flaking away from the wood, green on white on yellow on brown—layers and layers of colour.

Mike licked his lips: they were sore and split. He pawed hot sweat from his brow.

"Maybe, it's your grave?" a voice that could have been his mother's asked from out of the cellar shadows.

"Shut up!"

Mike looked for his mother, but he was alone.

His hands trembled slightly from the exertion of freeing the door. There were pains in his wrists and thighs as if termites were excavating the marrow from his bones.

Mike took hold of the doorknob—ornate metal, moulded like a nautilus—its surface was rust, scaly metal beneath his skin. He turned the knob, slowly, harder, harder – nothing.

Mike kicked the wood. "I'll have to jimmy it, maybe?" He looked about the cellar for something to use.

An odd buzzing sound commenced: soft, high-pitched, indistinct, like cicadas singing in the trees. Mike turned his head and eased forward.

He pressed his ear to the door.

"*Come in*," his own voice whispered through the keyhole.

Mike jolted backward. He shook his head. This was a stray thought, nothing more, disjointed thinking, errant radio waves, no ghost or goblin, a trick of the mind.

Mike looked toward the stairs and thought of his medication. Electric light shone from the open kitchen door. The floorboards creaked, upstairs in the lounge room. Not the heavy-set clomping of Uncle Albert, more like mother walking in slippers through the house.

Mike looked at the hammer.

"This is an opportunity," the Mike voice continued, the words wheezing through the lock. *"Find your dreams. Freedom."*

Mike's thinking congealed hearing this, as if his brain were amber with black flies that had been ideas.

"*Pop the lock*," Mike's voice urged. *"Do it. Come in."*

He turned to leave.

And noticed a crowbar, across the cellar, protruding from a wooden crate, shrouded in cobwebs amidst a jumble of disused tools. Blue metal sticking out of a side of the crate between two slats of wood next to a ball of crushed newspaper and an empty bottle of *Jim Bean*.

Mike snatched up the tool. He wiggled its beak in the door crack and heaved on the metal.

Shreds of wood pulp dropped away like chewed bits of steak. The lock popped out with the groan of splitting timber. The door edged open wheezing stale air.

Through the slit a light ignited. Yellow light, spilling past the door jam as if a bulb had been switched on in a room. A warmth gushed through the crack, and the colour of the light deepened to gold, gold like spring sunlight. Warm air began whistling through the opening, air with a scent of perfume, a floral smell coming from the radiance now spearing the dark.

"Miiiikey?" a voice called from the kitchen. It was his mother. "Don't go in there. Don't leave me."

But it was warm beyond the door. Mike could feel it.

Mike took hold of the door handle. He had to tug to get the door across the caked skin of cellar grime. Five inches, six inches, seven, more. All the time more. Light flooded into the

cellar. Mike couldn't see through the glare, couldn't see what lay beyond.

"Dooon't go!"

Mike grimaced as a stabbing pain burned down his spine. He reeled where he stood. Blots of darkness obscured his sight.

Yet, all he could think about was the light.

Mike poked his head through.

And found his face floating, hovering against a sky of azure blue.

Beyond the door, a panorama of hills rolled away covered in turquoise grass that was ankle deep. Undulating hills flowing away like a quilt of sea green, an endless pasture, lollipop trees, clear sky and flowers. Flowers were everywhere: blooms of silken white, celestial blue, vermilion, pink, some as large as watermelons and others tiny like apple seeds. The air was rich with their fragrance, an invigorating odour that cleared the head and made Mike feel alive.

The only sound was the susurration of the wind in the grass. The flowers like tendrils swayed.

Mike strolled into that place. To the left lay a distant emerald sea, a band of colour that melded with the clouds to touch heaven.

"I must have hit my head."

The Mike voice chuckled.

Mike turned.

Where the door should have been there was nothing – nothing at all – only air, butterflies, flowers, and pollen in the breeze.

He spun, feeling frantic.

Mike walked towards where the cellar door *should* have been and found nothing. He kept walking. He walked and didn't stop. There didn't appear to be any sun in the sky, only cloud, blue, and a glow like refracted light.

Butterflies, hundreds and thousands of butterflies, danced in the wind: sapphire blue, cream with ginger spots, mandarin, tangerine, olive, endless hues. Countless shapes and species. Mike walked and walked in this butterfly world.

A gnawing sensation grew in his belly.

Hunger?

Fear?

Mike began to run. He screamed for someone to save him.

Only the wind and the butterflies jiggled by.

Mike ran until exhaustion thumped him to the turf. With his chest heaving, he rolled in a green bed with his eyes agog, mouth open, gasping, whimpering—seeing yet not believing.

A butterfly alighted on the back of his wrist. Its body was translucent, as if its abdomen were made of clear glass. A second then a third joined the first. Mike felt a faint stinging sensation from where the first butterfly sat and watched with morbid fascination as its proboscis uncurled and pierced his skin. Black fluid billowed inside the butterfly's body as if the insect were sucking up ink.

Butterflies gathered in the air above Mike, and the sound of their wings was like the rustling of a thousand leaves. Hundreds, thousands gathered. They alighted as one on Mike and covered his body with a rainbow shroud.

Mike wanted to move but couldn't. A kaleidoscope of colour prohibited vision. A sensation of lethargy swept over him. All he could feel was the butterflies' kisses, their gentle touch as they tasted his skin.

He felt happy. He slept.

Hunger goaded him awake.

Mike ripped up a fistful of grass. He forced a handful of flowers into his mouth, and chewed.

When he stood, he headed toward the sea.

He walked until he could hear the faint hiss of the waves. He tasted salt in the air. He felt somewhat stronger and became aware that for the first time in memory he didn't feel any pain.

Mike looked at the sky – it was a beautiful day.

"Mikey?"

Mike looked toward the surf and smiled.

Uncle Albert waved at him from the shore.

J.R.Cain
October 9th, 2008

About The Author

James R.Cain has had stories and poems published in over 130 publications and is the editor of Dark Animus magazine http://www.darkanimus.com. His novel "Ek Chuah" is available from Active Bladder (USA). http://www.jamesrcain.com.

Editor's Note

I debated what to write here. I stood at my computer, my fingers on the keys, and wrote. Then erased. Then wrote again. Then, finally, realized I was thinking much too hard. Because this is the end, and there are only a few words left unsaid. So I will do my best to say them, and as concisely as possible.

There are a number of things in order, all of which have their place. One is a statement on my behalf, directed toward those who contributed to the project. They've given me some excellent material, better than I ever dreamed when I began putting *Candlelight* together. The other is a Thank You to you, the reader, for taking a look at what they've written. The whole idea of the project, after all, is to get the best of these short stories out there, into that huge world of literature, so they can be experienced. Read. Lived. I hope you've enjoyed what you've seen here, and I hope you're excited about what is to come.

Because there is more. Oh yes, there is a lot more in the very near future.

Overall, *Candlelight* could not have come together any more seamlessly. It was a pleasure reading the stories that poured in, talking with the respective authors, finding a photographer for the

cover art. The entire process fell into place, almost as if it was meant to happen. As if Fate was smiling, broadly, and reading along. So, somewhere in the middle of the whole thing, I realized I wanted *Candlelight* to become more than a one-time publication. More than a single anthology. Because I could tell there were more stories out there that were worth reading, worth publishing, worth showing to the world. And I didn't want to close the doors on them before I'd even given them a chance.

With that in mind, *Candlelight* has become a tri-annual publication. This issue came out on October 9th, 2008. The next will appear roughly four months later, on February 9th. Then, following, will be the June 9th issue. And so on and so on until there are no more stories to be told. Which, as we all know, is a point that can never be reached.

And that, dear reader, is the future.

But now to the rest. And to more regards. The first, and fully deserved, is to the following websites:

http://www.duotrope.com
http://www.ralan.com

These two have been irreplaceable in the formation of the *Candlelight* series. They are both free websites, providing services to writer and publishers alike. They are basically the directories through which publishers announce their projects and writers find them. They have both been gracious enough to list the *Candlelight* series, to be flexible when I changed my mind and my guidelines, and to do this all for absolutely no charge. Which, due to the quality of the websites and the necessity of their existence—the world revolves around the internet these days, as we all know, and it is the main vehicle for the exchange of these yet-unpublished manuscripts—they could be fully justified in requesting.

If you are also a writer, reading this, you no doubt share these sentiments.

Finally, the end of it all. I've said my bit, but that is to largely be ignored. The stories before this are what is truly important. People have been telling each other stories since before time was measured, and they will no doubt continue to tell them into the far future. So I hope this volume finds its way onto your

bookshelf, where it can be read again and again. Especially when night has fallen, the doors are locked, and there is a storm breaking over the horizon. Because then, I am sure, these stories will be exactly what you are looking for.

All the best;

Jonathan J. Schlosser
Editor

Grand Rapids, MI
October 9th, 2008

About the Editor

Jonathan J. Schlosser first discovered horror through The Bachman Books, which, of course, turned out to be written by Stephen King. He has been writing horror, fantasy, and science fiction for a little over a year, in which time he has published twenty-one short stories. He is currently working on two novels, *False Teeth* and *The Lighthouse on Torch Lake*, along with this anthology series. He lives in Grand Rapids.

You can visit his website at www.jonathanjschlosser.com.